



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS: Alliance Accepting Proposals for Excellence and Innovation in Digital Learning; Winners to Be Featured on Digital Learning Day 2015

As a final reminder, the Alliance for Excellent Education is now accepting online submissions to identify districts, schools, and out-of-school programs that are effectively leveraging digital learning and technology to improve outcomes for middle and high school students. Selected submissions will be invited to participate in online and in-person events, in addition to being highlighted in video interviews, case studies, and other publications associated with the Alliance's 2015 Digital Learning Day and Project 24 initiatives throughout 2015.

The Alliance has identified four areas in which submissions will be judged:

- **Relevance:** Submissions that include the innovative use of digital learning to ensure students graduate from high school ready for college and a career are welcome, including at the school, district, or state levels. Innovative uses of digital learning in out-of-school programs, including libraries, museums, and other community partners are also encouraged.
- **Proven effectiveness:** Submissions should specify how the program has increased student achievement, graduation rates, and college- and career-readiness rates. Also of interest is evidence of increased attendance, decreased discipline problems, improved teaching skills, equitable teacher distribution, and improved leadership and school climate.
- **Underserved student populations:** Submissions should explain how the use of digital learning has played a role in supporting the broader reform and improvement of low-performing schools and increasing equity among low-income, rural, and special education students, English learners, and students of color.
- **Middle and high schools:** Submissions should provide examples of promising practices used primarily in the middle and high school grades. If a broader range of grades is served, limit quantitative and qualitative data to middle and high school grades, if possible.

The Alliance is particularly interested in digital learning success stories that highlight effective practices in one or more the following categories: curriculum, instruction, and assessment; professional learning; data and privacy; budget and resources; community partnerships; use of time; and technology, networks, and hardware.

The deadline for submissions is **November 10, 2014**. More information on the submissions process, including an online application form, is available at <http://bit.ly/1tsCXfD>.



PROMISE AND POTENTIAL: Digital Badge Systems Are Promising Learning Tools for Effectively Demonstrating Students’ College- and Career-Ready Skills, New Alliance Report Finds

A new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education, *Digital Badge Systems: The Promise and Potential*, highlights how the growing use of digital badge systems in and out of school supports professional learning for educators and strengthening college and career readiness among participating youth.

“Like digital DNA, the set of badges earned by any given individual can reflect the interests and experiences that make the student unique,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Emerging systems of digital badges enrich course curriculum for students in both formal and out-of-school environments leaving them with valuable learning experiences that greatly support their capabilities in postsecondary education and the workforce.”

Digital badges are digital credentials that allow students to create a unique learning experience around necessary workforce skills, interests, and achievements. More than a letter grade or grade point average, digital badges improve student learning and outcomes by allowing the student to be the nucleus of their learning experience.

Digital badge systems are generating a considerable amount of interest. The report highlights several examples of systems in early stages of implementation, including those by the Chicago Summer of Learning, the Providence After School Alliance, Young Adult Library Services Association, and the University of California, Davis. With the support of the MacArthur Foundation, Mozilla Foundation, and a host of other partners, these nascent efforts are part of a much larger movement toward connecting anytime, anywhere learning opportunities across a variety of formal and informal institutions.

The report offers several policy recommendations for introducing digital badge systems to a greater number of school districts. Strategies include transitioning from seat-time requirements for learning to more flexible models that advance students after they master course content. Additionally, the report recommends safeguards at the state level to ensure competency-based learning does not lead to at-risk students falling behind their peers and widening of achievement gaps. Recognizing the importance of student privacy, the report emphasizes the importance of clear protocols around how student data is collected and how student privacy is protected within a badge system.

“Given the potential of digital badge systems for improving college- and career-ready skills, more schools and school districts should consider their use to support a more rich and well-rounded learning environment for students,” said Wise.

Digital Badge Systems: The Promise and Potential is available at <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/DigitalBadgeSystems/>.



DISTRICT IMPLEMENTATION OF CONSORTIA-DEVELOPED ASSESSMENTS: In New Survey, Many School Districts Withhold Judgment on New Assessments Aligned with Common Core State Standards

While about 90 percent of school district officials in states that have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in math and English language arts (ELA) say that the new standards are more rigorous than their state's previous standards in these subjects, roughly half believe it is too soon to tell whether the new assessments developed to align with the CCSS will be an improvement over their state's current assessment, will drive instruction in positive ways, or will produce results that will be understood and used by parents and students. Both findings stem from a survey conducted by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at George Washington University and were included in two recent CEP reports.

“It is important to remember that most district leaders are still relatively unfamiliar with the new assessments,” said **Maria Ferguson, executive director of CEP**. “District leaders are going to need time to familiarize themselves with the assessments and create an infrastructure of support for both teachers and students before they can determine their impact.”

During the 2014-15 school year, more than half of U.S. states will administer new assessments developed by either the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) or the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics.

Of school districts with an opinion on the CCSS-aligned assessments, those with positive opinions significantly outweighed those with negative views. For example, 45 percent of school districts in states that belonged to a CCSS assessment consortium agreed that the new assessments will yield information that will inform instruction in ELA. Only 5 percent disagreed with the statement while 46 percent said it was too soon to tell. Additionally, 40 percent of districts believed that the new assessments will do a better job of measuring higher-order analytics skills and performance than the state's current assessments, compared to only 5 percent who disagreed; 50 percent said it was too soon to tell.

The CEP has surveyed state leaders on their work to implement standards, and earlier this year, released a study that provided information on district leaders' views of the CCSS. The new report, *Common Core State Standards in 2014: District Implementation of Consortia-Developed Assessments*, notes that district leaders were less sanguine than the state officials surveyed in 2013 were more certain than the 2014 school district respondents that the consortia-developed assessments would do a better job of measuring higher-order skills than the state's previous assessment, have positive effects on instruction, and represent an improvement over the previous state assessments in ELA and math. “This is not surprising because states have been involved much more directly than districts in the development of assessments aligned to the Common Core,” the report notes.

The consortia-developed assessments appear to have encouraged many school districts to reevaluate and revise the assessments they are currently using. According to the report, 53 percent of districts are considering revising their formative assessments in math and ELA, which teachers use to inform decisions about instruction. Approximately 45 percent of districts are

thinking about revising their interim assessments, which are used to determine whether students are on track to perform well on future high-stakes tests. However, only a handful of districts are planning to eliminate their formative or interim assessments.

One concern that school districts have deals with technology—or lack thereof. The Smarter Balanced and PARCC assessments will be administered online, but a paper-and-pencil version will be provided to students in schools that lack the necessary technology. As shown in the below table taken from the report, 76 percent of districts in states belonging to a CCSS assessment consortium reported facing major or minor challenges in having available in their schools sufficient numbers of computers with adequate processing speed and screen characteristics for administering the consortium assessments. Additionally, 67 percent worried about the availability of adequate internet access and bandwidth in their schools.

Table 2. District technological challenges in implementing consortia-developed assessments

	Major challenge	Minor challenge	Not a challenge	Too soon to tell	Don't know
Availability in the schools of sufficient numbers of computers with adequate processing speed and screen characteristics	42%	34%	22%	2%	—
Availability in the district of expertise to address technology problems that may arise during test administration	30%	41%	27%	3%	—
Availability in the schools of expertise to address technology problems that may arise during test administration	35%	40%	20%	5%	—
Availability in the schools of adequate internet access and bandwidth	29%	38%	31%	3%	—
Adequacy of security measures to protect the online assessment from cheating	14%	32%	37%	15%	2%

When asked when they expect to have the necessary technological infrastructure in place to administer CCSS-aligned assessments, 61 percent said they will have it in place in the 2014–15 school year while 26 percent said the 2015–16 school year or later; 14 percent were not sure.

“The implementation of consortia-developed assessments for the CCSS will continue to be a work in progress beyond this eventful school year,” the report notes. “How district leaders view and use the assessments will likely change over time as they become more familiar with the benefits and challenges of these new tests. As with the standards, district leaders will need time and support to maintain momentum as they process their experiences from this first year and make plans for the next school year.”

Common Core State Standards in 2014: District Implementation of Consortia-Developed Assessments is available at <http://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=442>.



DISCONNECTIONS: *EdSource* Article Highlights Technological Challenges Facing Many California Schools in Delivering Online Assessments

This spring, some California schools, including some bordering Silicon Valley, could face difficulty in delivering online statewide tests developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium unless they receive improvements to their internet connections, according to an [October 28 article in *EdSource*](#). The article notes that the California state legislature made \$26.7 million in funding available in June to improve schools’ internet connections, but more money is needed.

Teri Sanders, senior director of education technology at the Imperial County Office of Education/K–12 High Speed Network, which works with most of the state’s schools to improve their routing and connection to the internet, tells *EdSource* that all of the available

money could be spent on eight or nine counties in northern California. “These sites that have zero to very low connectivity are in areas that are so sparsely populated [that commercial internet providers] have never invested in building to the areas,” Sanders said.

The article highlights challenges facing schools with no or limited access to high-speed connections. For example, **Corey Kidwell, superintendent of the Loma Prieta Joint Union School District**, located 30 minutes from Silicon Valley, told *EdSource* that online assessments “sucked all of the bandwidth out of the schools and the shared resources in the community. . . . Last year we basically had to disrupt instruction for at least three weeks because nobody could use computers while the 365 students took the test.”

In the Los Angeles Unified School District, students experienced a variety of technological problems during the Smarter Balanced field tests last spring, including being bumped off the test site, screens freezing, and problems logging in, the article notes.

E-rate, the federal government’s largest education technology program, supports internet connectivity and other communications services for the nation’s schools and libraries, but traditionally provided little support for Wi-Fi even as students, teachers, and library patrons increasingly rely more on tablets, laptops, and other devices to access the internet. In July 2014, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to modernize E-rate with the goal of providing greater Wi-Fi access to millions of students. Still, challenges remain in delivering high-speed internet connections to rural schools and libraries and ensuring that sufficient funding exists to meet E-rate funding needs.

In [comments submitted September 15, 2014](#), the Alliance for Excellent Education called on the FCC to increase the funding cap for the E-rate program to ensure that all students, especially those most disadvantaged, have access to high-speed internet connections and anytime, anywhere learning.

“Reliable access to high-speed broadband is as important to learning today as traditional textbooks were fifty years ago,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “The FCC’s vote in July to modernize E-rate was a critical first step, but now the FCC must permanently increase funding for E-rate so that at least 99 percent of the nation’s students have access to high-speed broadband in their schools and libraries within the next five years.”

The complete *EdSource* article, “Many Schools Lack Internet Capacity for Tests,” is available at http://edsource.org/2014/schools-lack-internet-capacity-for-tests/68797#.VFb6D_nF_hm.



GREATER EQUITY IN STEM: Common Core State Standards Can Close Gender Gaps in STEM Fields, According to New CAP/AAUW Publication

A new fact sheet from the Center for American Progress (CAP) and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) outlines how the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) can close achievement gaps in math and science between boys and girls—especially girls from low-income backgrounds and girls of color—with better access to science, technology, engineering, and math

(STEM) courses in grade school and better prepare them for college and a career that pays competitive wages.

“High expectations and rigorous standards—including those embodied by the Common Core—are essential to raising student achievement. Success in STEM fields is crucial not only for students themselves, but for our national economic outlook,” said **Carmel Martin, executive vice president for policy at CAP**. “Nothing should stand in the way of girls and women succeeding in STEM classes or careers. The Common Core will help build powerful academic foundation for all students.”

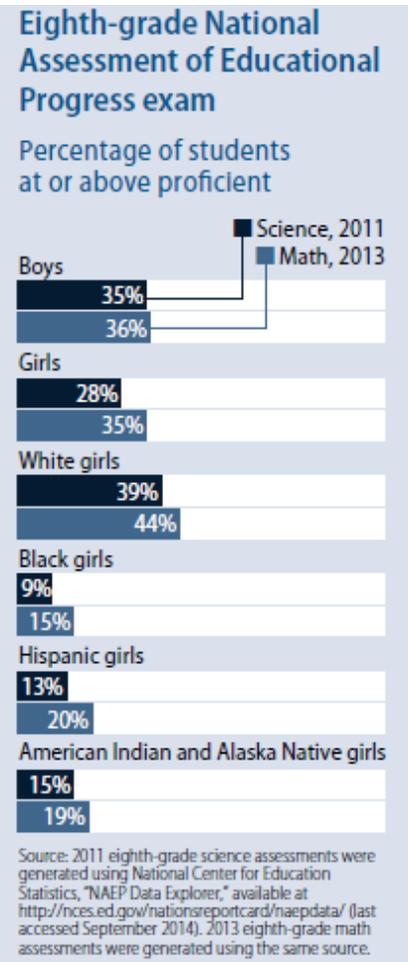
The fact sheet, “For Women and Girls, the Common Core Is a Step Toward Greater Equity,” includes a variety of statistics showing the disparities in achievement between boys and girls—and between white girls and girls of color. For example, on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card, 39 percent of white girls scored at or above proficient in math, compared to only 9 percent of black girls and 13 percent of Hispanic girls, as shown in the image to the right.

Girls and students of color also take Advanced Placement exams for computer science, physics, and calculus at lower rates and pass less frequently than boys, the fact sheet notes. Female students are also less likely to major in science, math, engineering, and computer and information sciences than boys, instead pursuing majors in lower-paying fields such as health care and education. Specifically, women make up 88 percent of graduates in health care and 81 percent of graduates in education while they account for only 18 percent of graduates in engineering and engineering technology and 19 percent in computer and information sciences.

By exposing girls to STEM courses at an earlier age, the CCSS “allow girls the opportunity to seize STEM learning opportunities while in grade school, pursue a diverse set of college majors, and to obtain jobs that command higher salaries,” the fact sheet notes.

“Bias and stereotypes prevent girls from performing well in STEM, pursuing STEM majors, and ultimately working in high-paying STEM fields,” said **Lisa Maatz, AAUW vice president of government relations**. “Our research has found that one way to mitigate stereotypes’ damaging effects is through explicit and transparent standards, such as the Common Core. The Common Core ensures that all students are being taught the standards they need to succeed.”

“For Women and Girls, the Common Core Is a Step Toward Greater Equity” is available at <http://ampr.gs/1wInzrz>.





ENSURING EQUITY AND ACCESS: Civil Rights Investigation of New Jersey School District Leads to Agreement to Improve African Americans Students' Access to Advanced Placement and Other Advanced Courses

On October 1, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** announced new guidance to states, school districts, and schools to ensure that all students have equal access to educational resources, such as effective teaching, challenging course work, access to technology, and safe school facilities. Included in the guidance, which took the form of a [Dear Colleague letter](#), was information on how the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) could investigate and act when it discovers disparities in resources.

"Today's guidance ... will put important tools in the hands of schools and communities and school districts and states to ensure that all young people receive what they need and deserve," Duncan said during an October 1 speech at the at the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, Tri-Caucus Plenary Session. "We will be a partner in that effort and we will be a watchdog. Because we are serious about increasing education success and attainment for all students, we must also be serious about increasing equitable access to opportunity and ending the tired, decades-long practice of offering students of color, less than what we offer to other students."

A few weeks after Duncan's announcement, [OCR announced an agreement on October 28](#) with the School District of South Orange & Maplewood (New Jersey) to provide African American students with better access to Advanced Placement (AP) and other higher-level learning opportunities.

The announcement comes after an OCR investigation that began in May 2013 revealed that the school district's approximately 2,500 African American students are significantly underrepresented in advanced and higher-level learning opportunities in the district's elementary, middle, and high schools. According to a press release from ED, African American students occupied only 18.7 percent of the spots in the district's AP courses even though they accounted for 51.5 percent of the district's high school enrollment.

As part of the agreement, the district will take several actions to increase African American students' access to its college- and career-preparatory programs, including greater student, parent, and community outreach about the available courses and programs; improvements to academic counseling services at the middle and high school levels; and training for relevant district and school site administrators and personnel.

Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress is a free biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events in Washington, DC, and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor; Ariana Witt; and Kate Bradley.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington, DC-based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. For more information, visit www.all4ed.org. Follow the Alliance on Twitter (www.twitter.com/all4ed), Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed), and the Alliance's "High School Soup" blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).