



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



EVERY CHILD ACHIEVES ACT: U.S. Senators Unveil Bipartisan Bill to Rewrite NCLB; Bill Draws Criticism for Lack of Safeguards for Low-Performing Schools and Students

On April 14, the U.S. Senate education committee will consider a bipartisan bill to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The bill, titled the Every Child Achieves Act, maintains NCLB's assessment schedule and requires states to report on the performance of various subgroups of students. Although the bill was universally praised for the bipartisan nature in which it was written, it has drawn criticism for its failure to include critical safeguards for low-performing schools and students.

“Our agreement continues important measurements of the academic progress of students but restores to states, local school districts, teachers, and parents the responsibility for deciding what to do about improving student achievement,” said **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN)**, who unveiled the bill on April 7 in a [joint announcement with U.S. Senator Patty Murray \(D-WA\), the HELP Committee's top Democrat](#). “This should produce fewer and more appropriate tests. It is the most effective way to advance higher standards and better teaching in our 100,000 public schools. We have found remarkable consensus about the urgent need to fix this broken law, and also on how to fix it.”

The bill requires annual math and English language arts assessments in grades 3–8 and once in high school and requires states to develop a statewide accountability system. For elementary and middle schools, the accountability system will incorporate test scores, English language proficiency, a statewide academic indicator selected by the state, and an additional indicator selected by the state. For high schools, the accountability system will incorporate test scores, graduation rates, English language proficiency, and an additional indicator selected by the state.

“While there is still work to be done, this agreement is a strong step in the right direction that helps students, educators, and schools, gives states and districts more flexibility while maintaining strong federal guardrails, and helps make sure all students get the opportunity to learn, no matter where they live, how they learn, or how much money their parents make,” Murray said.

Some organizations, including the Alliance for Excellent Education, have questioned the strength of the federal guardrails, especially as they relate to the nation's lowest-performing schools and traditionally underserved students. For example, the bill requires states to report data on the performance of individual schools and student subgroups, including students of color, low-

income students, and others, but the bill grants states the flexibility to determine when to intervene and how. It requires states to set goals for assessments and high school graduation rates, but the bill does not require states to take action when goals are missed.

For these reasons, [Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise writes in a blog post](#) that the bill “could start a major retreat from the recent historic increases in high school graduation rates.” Wise notes that the bill “provides extensive flexibility to states on how to respond,” but it does not actually require states to act. “That is like equipping the fire department with new tools and alarms, then giving each fire house the option to choose which fires to put out,” Wise writes.

Wise calls on the Senate HELP Committee to require states to target resources and focus reform on high schools with a graduation rate at or below 67 percent. According to a new Alliance report, there are more than 1,200 of these high schools nationwide and they enroll more than 1.1 million students, most of whom are low-income students or students of color. (See the article below for more information on the report, *Below the Surface*.) Additionally, Wise says the committee should require states to intervene in schools where students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, English language learners, and other subgroups of students fail to meet the state’s high school graduation rate goal for two years in a row.

“As it rewrites NCLB, the Congress has the opportunity to couple much greater flexibility for states and districts with proven requirements that continue increasing graduation rates for all students,” Wise writes. “Tuesday’s committee action should be about changing the provisions of the fourteen-year-old NCLB that do not reflect current education needs, not reversing the gains that have been made in improving high school graduation rates.”

For more information, read Wise’s blog post, “Alexander-Murray Bill to Rewrite NCLB Lacks Critical Safeguards for Low-Performing Schools and Students,” at <http://t.co/7gWbZdMW7p>.

BELOW THE SURFACE: New Alliance Report Reveals Nation’s Hidden High School Graduation Rate Crisis

The U.S. high school graduation rate is at an all-time high of 81.4 percent, but a new report by the Alliance for Excellent Education finds that more than 1,200 high schools nationwide graduate less than two-thirds of their students. These high schools enroll more than 1.1 million students nationwide, with students of color and low-income students making up the majority of students who attend them. The report, *Below the Surface: Solving the Hidden Graduation Rate Crisis*, calls on the U.S. Congress to focus on these lowest-performing high schools as it works to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).



“Having the national high school graduation rate at an all-time high is something to celebrate, but it is too soon to jubilantly cut down the basketball nets,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “I appreciate the bipartisan effort taking place to improve NCLB—America’s students have been in overtime for eight years waiting for a rewrite. Unfortunately, the draft bill released by U.S. Senators Lamar Alexander and Patty Murray requires states to identify the nation’s lowest-performing high schools, but it does not require states to improve them. As it works to rewrite ESEA, the Congress should target funding for school improvement and provide states and school districts with resources to turn around high schools with graduation rates at or below 67 percent.”

According to the report, high schools with graduation rates at or below 67 percent exist in nearly every state—nineteen states have at least twenty such schools. California and New York have 105 and 199 of these schools, respectively, while southern states, such as Alabama and Mississippi, have more than fifty; Georgia has 115.

These high schools predominantly, and disproportionately, enroll traditionally underserved students. In Michigan, for example, African American students represent only 18.4 percent of K–12 students in the state, but they account for 69.1 percent of the student population in the lowest-performing high schools. In Massachusetts, Hispanic students represent 16.4 percent of K–12 students, but they account for 51.3 percent of the student population in the lowest-performing high schools.

Nationally, of the more than 1.1 million students attending these low-graduation-rate high schools,

- 40 percent of students are African American, even though African American students make up less than 15.7 percent of the overall K–12 public school student population;
- only 26 percent of students are white, even though white students make up 51 percent of the overall K–12 public school student population; and
- 70 percent are students from low-income families, even though students from low-income families make up 50 percent of the overall K–12 public school student population.

While stressing the importance of local decisionmaking, *Below the Surface* calls on Congress to include identification—and support for—poorly performing high schools among its priorities as it works to rewrite ESEA.

“In keeping with the Congress’s focus on state flexibility, ESEA should not prescribe the specific interventions to be implemented in low-performing high schools,” said Wise. “Rather, state- and school-level officials should determine which evidence-based interventions fit their needs based on the educational challenges each school faces.”

The report includes examples of high schools in New York City, Chicago, Miami, and Talladega County, Alabama, that are using effective solutions such as early-warning systems, personalized learning environments, and dropout recovery to significantly increase the number of low-income students and students of color graduating from high school ready for college and a career.

The report, which includes state-by-state data on the number of low-performing schools and demographic information on the students they enroll, is available at <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/belowthesurface/>.



“DRAMATIC ACTION, DRAMATIC IMPROVEMENT”: New Center for American Progress Brief Identifies Key Elements to Successful School Turnaround

Turning around low-performing schools is possible when school districts take aggressive steps to do so, according to a new issue brief from the Center for American Progress (CAP). The brief, “Dramatic Action, Dramatic Improvement: The Research on School Turnaround,” identifies five key elements to successful school turnaround and highlights four schools that have done so.

“The reality today is that hundreds of schools are chronically underperforming by virtually any standard and are in dire need of significant intervention,” said **Tiffany D. Miller, director for education policy at CAP**. “The good news is that the research shows that school turnaround is possible when there is a combination of dramatic action and targeted resources.”

The brief notes that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) required states and districts to identify and intervene in persistently low-performing schools but provided “very limited” resources to help those schools improve. As a result, failing schools were appropriately identified but rarely targeted for turnaround. To fill this void, the federal government launched the School Improvement Grants (SIG) program, which has awarded more than \$4 billion to turn around more than 1,200 schools nationwide over the last five years.

“Dramatic Action, Dramatic Improvement” spotlights four schools—Frederick Douglass High School in Baltimore; Leslie County High School in Kentucky; Emerson Elementary School in Kansas City; and Rose Ferrero Elementary School in California—that used funding from the SIG program to turn themselves around.

At Douglass High, where less than 25 percent of students received a diploma, a new principal was hired and more than half of the school’s staff was replaced, the brief notes. The school recruited new teachers who were committed to creating a college-going culture and prioritized staff development. It increased planning times for teachers and learning time for students and created a dual-enrollment program through Baltimore City Community College that allowed high school students to earn college credit.

“As a result, something dramatic happened between the 2010–11 and 2011–12 school years,” the brief notes. “Proficiency rates in English language arts rose from 41 percent in 2011 to 53 percent in 2012. Math proficiency rates also increased from 32 percent to 44 percent. And Douglass High’s less than 25 percent graduation rate is history: In 2014, the graduation rate was 57 percent. While the school still has room for improvement, this kind of momentous increase in student achievement is almost unheard of.”

Based on research studies from MDRC, the Council of Great City Schools, the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, Harvard University, and others, the brief identifies five critical elements of successful school turnaround:

- aggressive action on the part of school districts;
- requirements to turn around low-performing schools that are paired with targeted funding to do so;
- governance and staffing changes, including replacing ineffective school leaders;
- data-driven decisionmaking to improve student achievement; and
- a focus on school culture and nonacademic supports for disadvantaged students.

“Making greater strides in academic achievement will require more rigorous research into best practices, dedicated funding for school improvement, and a strong commitment to make the tough choices that are best for students,” the brief notes. “Federal policy should prioritize strong requirements and targeted support that not only identifies chronically failing schools, but also empowers states and districts to take meaningful action to turn those schools around.”

“Dramatic Action, Dramatic Improvement: The Research on School Turnaround” is available at <http://ampr.gs/1aW8m5V>.



DISCIPLINE PRACTICES IN CHICAGO SCHOOLS: New Report Finds that African American Students, Students with Low Test Scores, and Students with Disabilities Much More Likely to Be Suspended

African American students, students with low test scores, and students with disabilities were much more likely to be suspended than other students, according to a new report from the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (UChicago CCSR).

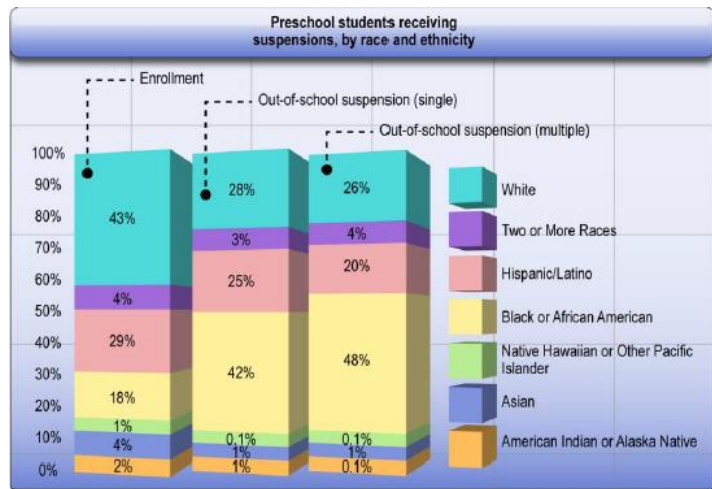
According to the report, *Discipline Practices in Chicago Schools: Trends in the Use of Suspensions and Arrests*, about one-third of African American high school boys received an out-of-school suspension (OSS) in School Year (SY) 2013–14, compared to 13 percent of Latino high school boys and 6 percent of white/Asian high school boys. Rates were also high for African American high school girls, 23 percent of whom received an OSS, compared to only 6 percent for Latina high school girls and 2 percent for white/Asian high school girls.

These rates mirror suspension rates nationwide, which are also disproportionately high for African American students. According to a [recent report from the U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection](#), disproportionately high suspension and expulsion rates for African American students begins as early as preschool.

As shown in the graph below, African American children represent 18 percent of preschool enrollment, but they account for 42 percent of preschool students who are suspended once and 48 percent of preschool students who receive more than one OSS. By comparison, white students represent 43 percent of preschool enrollment, but only 26 percent of preschool children who receive more than one OSS.

Among students with disabilities, 24 percent of high school students and 16 percent of middle school students received an OSS. Rates for students with test scores in the bottom quartile in the prior school year were similar.

“Thus, students who start the year with the weakest academic skills are more likely than other students to receive a suspension that removes them from classroom instruction,” the report notes.



Overall, the report finds that OSSs are decreasing. In SY 2009–10, 24 percent of high school students received an OSS, compared to 16 percent in SY 2013–14. During the six years covered by the report, Chicago Public Schools implemented policies to improve school climate and reduce the amount of instructional time lost to suspension. The move was in response to a larger national push to move away from “zero-tolerance” policies that remove students from the classroom in favor of alternate measures that address discipline in fair and equitable ways, help build positive school climate, and engage students.

The report points out that students who are suspended or expelled are more likely to struggle academically and drop out of school. Additionally, students who attend schools with zero-tolerance approaches to discipline are also likely to experience negative school environments. In the future, UChicago CCSR will release a follow-up report that examines the relationship between reductions in suspensions and school climate, particularly in schools that had the highest suspension rates.

Discipline Practices in Chicago Schools: Trends in the Use of Suspensions and Arrests is available at <https://ccsr.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Discipline%20Report.pdf>.

The Alliance for Excellent Education also released a series of four reports on school climate and alternate methods of school discipline. More information on these reports is available at http://all4ed.org/?s=&category=school-climate&show_only=reports.



IS THERE AN APP FOR THAT?: U.S. Department of Education Release Ed Tech Guide for Software and Application Developers

On April 7, the U.S. Department of Education released a guide for software developers, start-up organizations, and other entrepreneurs who are working to develop digital tools and applications to improve student learning and solve persistent problems in education.

“Technology makes it possible for us to create a different dynamic between a teacher and a classroom full of students,” [said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan](#). “It can open up limitless new ways to engage kids, support teachers and bring parents into the learning process. We need tools designed to help students discover who they are and what they care about, and tools that create portals to a larger world that, in the past, would have remained out of reach for far too many students.”

The guide presents ten opportunities for technology to transform teaching and learning, including closing opportunity and achievement gaps, improving professional development for educators, designing effective assessments, and increasing family engagement. It notes that creating applications and tools for education is “different” from other fields because they may have to navigate a variety of federal, state, and local policies. It includes basic information about school districts, schools, teachers, and students, and encourages developers to think about how privacy and accessibility laws may impact the applications that they are developing.

“The demand for high-quality educational apps is increasing as communities become more connected, devices become more affordable, and teachers and parents are looking for new ways to use technology to engage students,” said **Richard Culatta, director of educational technology for the U.S. Department of Education**. “Yet, many existing solutions don’t address the most urgent needs in education. Opportunities abound for software designers and developers to create impactful tools for teachers, school leaders, students, and their families.”

The guide was written with input from educators, developers, and researchers, including **Thomas Murray, Alliance for Excellent Education’s state and district digital learning policy and advocacy director**.

The *Ed Tech Developer’s Guide: A Primer for Software Developers, Startups, and Entrepreneurs* is available at <https://tech.ed.gov/files/2015/04/Developer-Toolkit.pdf>.

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; Kristen Loschert; 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).