



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



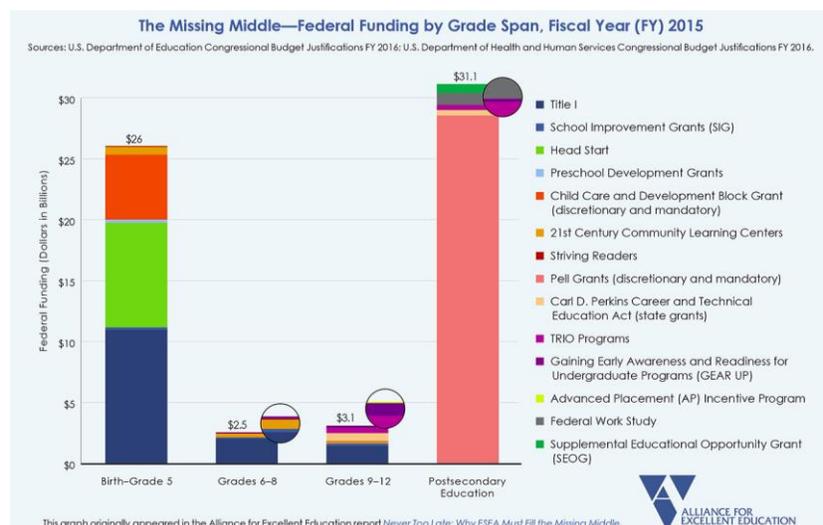
NEVER TOO LATE: New Alliance Report Uncovers “Missing Middle” in Federal Education Funding

Academic performance in middle school and the early high school years are critical turning points in determining whether students ultimately graduate from high school, yet a new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education reveals that federal funding largely ignores these years of a child's education. In fact, this “missing middle” in federal education funding leaves middle and high schools receiving tens of billions of dollars less than early education and postsecondary education, according to *Never Too Late: Why ESEA Must Fill the Missing Middle*.

“The federal government has made strong, worthwhile investments in the bookends of education—early education and postsecondary education—but it missed the middle,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Investments in the early grades and postsecondary education should be maintained, but to ensure these investments receive the greatest returns and translate into more students graduating from high school, the federal government must devote more attention to middle and high schools as it works to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as No Child Left Behind.”

Over the last few years, the U.S. high school graduation rate has risen to an all-time high, but much more work remains. Large gaps in graduation rates remain as white students continue to graduate at much higher rates than low-income students and students of color. Additionally, more than 1,200 high school graduate less than 67 percent of their students. More federal support is necessary to address these challenges, but federal funding for middle and high schools has actually decreased during this time.

As shown in the report graph to the right, the federal government spends \$26 billion on education programs serving children from birth through grade five and \$31.1 billion on postsecondary education programs; programs serving middle and high school students receive only \$5.6



billion. (A larger version of the graph is available at <http://bit.ly/1er4Y4w>).

Never Too Late cites research and successful district and school reform efforts showing that targeted support for low-performing high schools can make a significant difference in increasing graduation rates and improving student performance. For example, the U.S. Department of Education’s High School Graduation Initiative, which was eliminated in 2015, helped the Mobile County Public School System in Alabama implement a middle and high school dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery initiative that increased the high school graduation rate for participating students by 7 percentage points in just two years.

“Federal funding for high school programs has stagnated, decreased, and even been eliminated through the years despite the successes that have resulted from federally funded efforts,” the report notes. “The United States cannot continue to make progress toward ensuring that every student graduates from high school without supporting successful evidence-based reform in low-performing high schools.”

The current congressional effort to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as No Child Left Behind, provides an opportunity to accelerate gains made in the overall national high school graduation rate and increase graduation rates for low-income students, students of color, and other traditionally disadvantaged subgroups of students. Specifically, the report calls on the U.S. Congress to

- implement evidence-based comprehensive reform among high schools that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students;
- require states to intervene in high schools with consistently low graduation rates among student subgroups;
- authorize funding for “next-generation high schools” that will implement new models for school turnaround in the lowest-performing schools, expose students to the workforce, and allow students to earn college credit while in high school; and
- maintain a specific funding stream dedicated to school turnaround and target funds toward low-graduation rate high schools.

Never Too Late: Why ESEA Must Fill the Missing Middle is available at <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/NeverTooLate/>.



PROFICIENT VERSUS PREPARED: New Achieve Report Highlights “Honesty Gaps” in More than Half of States’ Student Proficiency Ratings

A new report by the education reform organization Achieve finds large “honesty gaps” between state-reported proficiency rates in math and reading compared to those on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is also known as the Nation’s Report Card. The report, *Proficient vs. Prepared: Disparities Between State Tests and the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*, calls NAEP the “gold standard for measuring student achievement” and a “yardstick for state comparisons,” but it notes that parents and students are usually unfamiliar with the test, instead relying on their state tests to know how students are performing.

“Parents and educators deserve honest, accurate information about how well their students are performing, and the extent to which they have a solid foundation for their continued learning,” said **Michael Cohen, president of Achieve**. “Tests are not the only source of this information, but they are certainly an important one. We don’t do our students any favors if we don’t level with them when test results come back.”

According to the report, more than half of states report a difference of 30 percentage points or more between their own proficiency results and those provided by NAEP. Georgia, for example, had one of the largest discrepancies for the 2013–14 year, reporting proficiency levels for fourth-grade reading and math that were 60 and 53 percentage points higher, respectively, than NAEP reported.

By contrast, some states, which the report deems “truth tellers,” are accurately reporting student achievement. The report notes that New York, for example, actually boasts proficiency requirements on its state tests that are more rigorous than NAEP according to the 2013–14 data. It was also the only state to report a smaller percentage of proficiency than NAEP for both fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math. For that, New York earned the highest rank on Achieve’s “Top Truth Tellers” list.

Largest and Smallest Gaps Between Proficiency Rates on State Tests Versus NAEP in Eighth-Grade Math, 2013–14

State	Percentage-Point Gap	State	Percentage-Point Gap
Georgia	-53	New York	+10
Texas	-48	Massachusetts	+3
District of Columbia	-46	Utah	-2
Mississippi	-46	Michigan	-5
Louisiana	-43	North Carolina	-6
Ohio	-43	Wisconsin	-6

Proficient vs. Prepared asserts that while the “misleading” deficiencies are a problem, many states are working to correct the “honesty gap” by introducing more challenging and rigorous curriculum and aligned assessments that can better measure a students’ college and career readiness. Kentucky had some of the nation’s largest gaps in proficiency before adopting the Common Core State Standards in 2010. As a result, the state narrowed a 32–percentage-point differential to 15 between 2011 and 2014, the report notes.

“Leaders in many states have already recognized the need to administer more rigorous tests that will provide more honest and accurate information. Unfortunately, in some states there is already political pressure to abandon their new assessments and go back to using less rigorous tests,” said Cohen. “This report shows us that we can’t go back to the way we’ve always done it.”

Proficient vs. Prepared is available at <http://www.achieve.org/files/NAEPBriefFINAL051415.pdf>.

Learn more about the “Honesty Gap” in each state and Washington, DC, at <http://www.honestygap.org>.



“IF YOU REFORM IT, THEY WILL COME”: New Federal Funding for Wi-Fi Networks Sees High Demand from Nation’s Schools and Libraries, FCC Chairman Announces

On December 11, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to increase funding for the federal E-rate program by \$1.5 billion annually to improve internet access in U.S. schools and libraries. The funding increase followed FCC action in July to target \$1 billion annually to expand Wi-Fi connections in the nation’s schools and libraries, as well as programmatic reforms to make E-rate dollars go further, including increasing transparency on how they are spent and what prices are charged for E-rate services.

In a May 11 blog post on the Federal Communications Commission website titled, “If You Reform It, They Will Come,” **FCC Commissioner Tom Wheeler** reveals that schools and libraries are jumping at the chance to apply for the additional E-rate funding. For the upcoming school year, schools and libraries have applied for more than \$3.9 billion in support, including more than \$1.6 billion for internal Wi-Fi networks.

“These requests reflect long pent-up demand,” Wheeler writes. “It is the first time in three years that E-rate has had any funds available for Wi-Fi at all. In the past, many schools and libraries didn’t bother to apply for Wi-Fi funding because they had no hope of getting funds. That is no longer a problem. . . . The bottom line is that E-rate is devoting its resources to where schools and libraries need the most help: getting access to robust broadband. This will open up new educational opportunities for students across the country.”

Read Wheeler’s blog post at <https://www.fcc.gov/blog/if-you-reform-it-they-will-come>.



SCHOOL TURNAROUND: New Research Shows Most States Lack the Capacity to Improve Low-Performing Schools

Although the majority of states have prioritized school turnaround efforts, most states still lack the capacity to transform their lowest-achieving schools, according to research from the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), a division of the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education.

NCEE is conducting a large-scale evaluation of the implementation and impacts of the Race to the Top (RTT) and School Improvement Grant (SIG) programs. The study focuses on the results of grants awarded through the general state RTT competition and grants awarded to the first cohort of SIG schools, which began implementing reforms during School Year (SY) 2010–11. In its most recent report, NCEE examines the capacity of states to support school improvement efforts, an area that both SIG and RTT target. The report defines capacity to include funding, technology, staff and staff expertise, and the ability to identify and leverage expertise.

For the report, State Capacity to Support School Turnaround, researchers interviewed state-level administrators in forty-nine states and the District of Columbia in spring 2012 and spring 2013

about the education policies and practices in place in their states to support school turnaround. (Texas did not participate in the 2012 interview; therefore, the researchers excluded it from the analysis.)

The researchers found that while more than 80 percent of states prioritized efforts to turn around low-performing schools, at least 50 percent of states found it difficult to accomplish the reform. “Several scenarios may explain why most states found turnaround so difficult,” according to the report. “Because research on effective strategies for sustaining turnaround in low-performing schools is limited, states may be uncertain how to pursue this goal. Moreover, turning around a school with a history of low performance is complex and challenging.”

Furthermore, the majority of states believe they simply lack the expertise necessary to turn around low-performing schools successfully. The NCEE researchers asked respondents about their state’s expertise in two categories: expertise to support school turnaround broadly and expertise in eight specific areas related to turnaround strategies emphasized in the SIG program. In 2012, thirty-eight states (76 percent) reported significant gaps in expertise, either for supporting school turnaround broadly or in at least one area related to SIG, according to the NCEE report. That number increased to forty states (80 percent) in 2013.

“[T]he three areas in which states most commonly reported significant gaps in SIG expertise were all related to teacher staffing, evaluation, and compensation policies,” the report states. In 2013, twenty-five states reported a significant gap in their expertise in “recruiting and retaining effective staff in low-performing schools,” up from seventeen states the previous year. Meanwhile, in both 2012 and 2013, twenty-one states reported significant gaps in their expertise in “developing and implementing teacher evaluation models based on student growth and/or ‘turnaround competencies,’” according to the report.

Fortunately, states are taking steps to enhance their capacity to improve low-performing schools. In the NCEE study, most states worked with intermediaries, such as institutions of higher education, regional and county offices, federally supported centers or labs, distinguished educators contracted to support the implementation of reform policies, and other external organizations to support their school turnaround efforts. In 2012, forty-seven states (94 percent) worked with outside organizations and experts, while in 2013, forty-four states (88 percent) did so. This finding is not surprising since most states already have relationships with external partners to support schools identified for improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act, the report notes.

More importantly, though, states are creating their own organizational and administrative structures to support school turnaround. Forty-six states reported having some form of state-level structure in place by SY 2012–13 to support school improvement, compared to just twenty-five states that reported having such structures in SY 2007–08. The most common structures states reported were establishing monitoring and reporting requirements for schools funded by SIG and RTT (forty-six states), having contracts with external consultants (thirty-four states), and creating state-level school turnaround offices (thirty-two states). This increase in state structures could reflect effects from RTT and SIG, since both programs include provisions aimed at improving state capacity, according to the report. But the researchers also note that the data in

the NCEE report does not confirm this, or any other possible explanation for the results, and they offer this explanation simply as a possibility and point for future examination.

State Capacity to Support School Turnaround is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20154012/>.



POSITIVE DOUBLE DIPPING: More Low-Income Students Take College Classes in High School When States, Districts Pay the Costs

Increasingly, states are expanding the availability of dual enrollment options, programs in which students earn high school and college credits simultaneously for a course or series of courses. Yet while states have committed to expanding these programs, many have not eliminated financial barriers that prevent low-income and students of color from participating, according to a recent analysis by the Education Commission of the States (ECS).

In nine states, students and/or their parents pay all tuition costs for dual enrollment classes, according to *State Approaches to Funding Dual Enrollment*. In eleven other states, the person or group responsible for tuition costs depends on the specific dual enrollment program a student chooses. But in nine of those states, students and/or their parents still pay some or all of the costs under at least one dual enrollment program. Meanwhile, in fourteen states and the District of Columbia, a student's high school and/or school district and the participating postsecondary institution assign responsibility for tuition payments locally. These local payment decisions create the greatest inequities in access to dual enrollment programs, according to the report.

“In practice, when dual enrollment tuition decisions are determined locally, access to dual enrollment courses can vary considerably district by district,” the report states. “Students in some districts pay little to no tuition . . . while students in the next district over must cover all tuition costs to access similar coursework.”

Students who participate in dual enrollment course work are more likely to graduate from high school, enter college, and complete college in less time than peers with similar high school academic performance and demographics, according to the report. Consequently, “[t]o ensure that all eligible students—regardless of family income or geography—have equal access to dual enrollment courses, states may consider funding models that place dual enrollment tuition costs with the state or district,” the report notes.

The report highlights several states that require local school districts or the state to pay all costs related to dual enrollment courses. Furthermore, the analysis finds that “states removing the tuition burden from dually enrolled students see larger proportions of minority and low-income students participating in dual enrollment programs.”

In Colorado, Florida, Iowa, and Wyoming, local school districts pay all tuition costs for dually enrolled students. Florida school districts use general operating funds to reimburse higher education institutions for the full tuition costs of dually enrolled high school students. Iowa provides districts with extra funding to support dually enrolled students by giving dually enrolled students additional weight in the state's per-student funding formula. In School Year (SY) 2013–

14, for instance, districts received an additional \$18–20 million in state funds from these extra weights to cover tuition costs for dually enrolled students. This extra funding boosts participation. According to the report, Iowa led the nation in the number of students younger than eighteen years old who were enrolled in community college in SY 2013–14, when approximately 30 percent of all community college students in Iowa were high school students.

In North Carolina and Minnesota, the state pays at least part of the tuition costs for dually enrolled students. Through North Carolina’s Career & College Promise Program, the state legislature allocates funds for dually enrolled students to the state’s community colleges based on participation numbers from the previous academic year, which is the same method used for allocating state funds for traditional community college students.

Meanwhile, the Minnesota Department of Education reimburses colleges directly for high school students who pursue course work on college campuses through the state’s Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program. Similarly, through a newer concurrent enrollment program, high school students also can take college-level courses at their own high schools. This concurrent enrollment program makes dual enrollment course work accessible to students who cannot travel to a college campus as required by the PSEO program, the report notes.

Participation in Minnesota’s new concurrent enrollment program continues to rise, particularly among students of color and low-income students. Between SY 2008–09 and SY 2013–14, the number of students in the concurrent enrollment program increased 23 percent. The participation of students of color, meanwhile, increased 43 percent—twice the growth of white students, according to the ECS report. During that same time period, the number of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch who participated in concurrent enrollment and PSEO increased 36 percent and 40 percent respectively. As a result, low-income students now represent 17 percent of students in the concurrent enrollment program and 19.5 percent of students in PSEO.

State Approaches to Funding Dual Enrollment is available at <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/18/92/11892.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](https://twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).