



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **LIFELINE MODERNIZATION: FCC Decision to Modernize Lifeline Program Extends Internet Access to Low-Income Families**

Low-income families will soon be able to purchase reduced internet access thanks to a March 31 vote by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to modernize its Lifeline program. Previously, the thirty-year-old Lifeline provided a discount on monthly telephone service to eligible low-income households, but it did not support internet access.

“By dramatically improving Lifeline’s management and design, and putting the program on sound fiscal footing moving forward, we will help low-income Americans all across our nation connect to the internet and the opportunities of the broadband revolution,” [said FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler](#). “Internet access has become essential for full participation in our modern economy and our society, but 64.5 million Americans are missing out on the opportunities made possible by the most powerful and pervasive platform in history.”

With the changes to the program, qualifying low-income consumers can use the \$9.25 per month that they receive through the Lifeline program for stand-alone mobile or fixed broadband service, as well as bundled voice and data service packages. Wheeler said the changes to the Lifeline program will ensure that low-income consumers are “not relegated to second class service” and will “have choices that allow them to get the most value for the subsidy.”

The new Lifeline program will establish minimum broadband service standards that are consistent with the FCC’s definition of high-speed internet. In many rural communities, cost is not the only barrier to reliable broadband access. Slow connection speeds and limited options for broadband providers are also a concern. The changes the FCC adopted are intended to improve the quality of service and encourage more providers to serve low-income and rural areas. The changes will also make it easier for broadband providers to participate in the program and create an independent third party to verify eligibility.

Adding internet access as a service of the Lifeline program was especially critical for students from low-income families. In their statements, FCC Commissioners Mignon Clyburn and Jessica Rosenworcel describe the great lengths that students—both young and old—frequently went to access a Wi-Fi signal, including sitting in a McDonald’s for hours, pretending to be a hotel guest, or standing in an elementary school parking lot after school hours.

“[These individuals] struggle to make ends meet, feed their families, and better themselves educationally, professionally, and medically,” [Clyburn said](#). “Their goal is not to forever qualify

for Lifeline, but to take advantage of a fully reformed program that could be the bridge for them to better themselves and have increased opportunities.”

“Today, as many as seven in ten teachers assign homework that requires access to broadband,” [Rosenworcel said](#). “But data here at the Commission show that as many as one in three households do not subscribe to broadband service, citing lack of affordability and lack of interest. . . . “There was a time when broadband access was a luxury. No more. And nothing demonstrates this as clearly as with education.”

According to a [recent survey from the Pew Research Center](#), more than 5 million American households with children between the ages of six and seventeen do not have access to high-speed internet at home. A disproportionate share of those 5 million households are comprised of low-income African American and Latino families.

“Trying to navigate today’s complex world with telephone service but no internet access is like using a horse and buggy on the interstate,” [said Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise](#). “Today’s FCC vote follows the December 2014 vote to expand high-speed Wi-Fi access to 99 percent of schools and libraries. Together, these important votes will close gaps in connectivity—both at school and at home—and bring ‘anytime, anywhere’ learning to the nation’s students.”

The FCC also established a budget for the program of \$2.25 billion, indexed for inflation. When spending reaches 90 percent of that ceiling, the FCC will be notified. “This mechanism will ensure that the Commission has the notice and comprehensive information it needs to determine the reasons for growth in the program and to promptly make any necessary changes to the program to keep it on sound financial footing,” Wheeler said.

The new changes to Lifeline will be phased in over the next few years. As the FCC implements the new regulation, the Alliance for Excellent Education will share additional information and resources on how to help students and families take advantage of this important opportunity.

For more information on the changes to the Lifeline program, read the FCC’s press release at <https://www.fcc.gov/document/fcc-modernizes-lifeline-program-digital-age>.



## **IS YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT FUTURE READY?: Alliance for Excellent Education Announces 2016 Future Ready Schools Summits and Workshops**

Registration is now open for the 2016 [Future Ready Schools](#) (FRS) national summits and workshops to help school district leaders improve teaching and student learning outcomes through the effective use of technology.

A project of the Alliance for Excellent Education, [FRS](#) is partnering with the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to offer free, two-day summits for school district teams to work with FRS facilitators to jump-start their planning efforts and refine their vision for personalized student learning. FRS is also offering free, one-day training workshops to utilize the comprehensive [FRS dashboard](#) and learn how to systemically plan using the [five-step planning process](#).

“With the new Every Student Succeeds Act requiring district planning efforts, Future Ready Schools provides the guidance and support for district leaders to create personalized learning environments in schools using technology to leverage quality teaching and better student outcomes,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “These summits and workshops are an opportunity for district leaders to learn, collaborate, and plan, with the goal of improving learning experiences for all students, particularly those from traditionally underserved communities.”

### **Future Ready Schools Summits**

The national summits are open to leadership teams from school districts where the superintendent has signed the [Future Ready District Pledge](#)—a commitment to implementing meaningful changes toward a digital learning transition that supports teachers and addresses the district’s vision for student learning. More than 2,100 district superintendents nationwide have already taken the pledge. Superintendents who have yet to take the pledge can do so at <http://futureready.org/about-the-effort/take-the-pledge/>.

Each summit enables FRS district leadership teams to set a shared vision for student learning; create action plans for digital learning; and network with other regional leaders who are engaged in FRS. To solve specific issues facing district teams, participants will have access to national experts, regional colleagues, and successful implementation examples. District teams will also engage in facilitated conversations, networking activities, and team planning opportunities.

The schedule for the 2016 FRS national summits is as follows:

- April 25–26: Austin, Texas
- May 19–20: Seattle, Washington
- June 2–3: Orlando, Florida
- June 14–15: Madison, Wisconsin
- November 14–15: Boston, Massachusetts

### **Future Ready Schools Workshops**

These new one-day workshops offer school district FRS project managers hands-on training focused on the [FRS dashboard](#)—a comprehensive online planning tool to help school districts assess readiness, gather input, and create an action plan for digital learning through a five-step planning process. During the workshops, participants will gain an understanding of the dashboard and its various components. They will also receive tangible strategies for engaging team members in the effective use of the dashboard as an interactive, collaborative action planning tool.

The schedule for the 2016 national workshops is as follows:

- April 13: Redondo Beach, California
- September 8: Salt Lake City, Utah

September 29: Fort Thomas, Kentucky  
October 20: Albuquerque, New Mexico  
November 1: Washington, DC

To register for a summit or a workshop, visit [futureready.org/summits](http://futureready.org/summits).

FRS summits are made possible by support from Google, Microsoft, Nellie Mae Foundation, and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. The FRS dashboard is underwritten by AT&T and McGraw-Hill Education and the FRS workshops are made possible by support from McGraw-Hill Education.



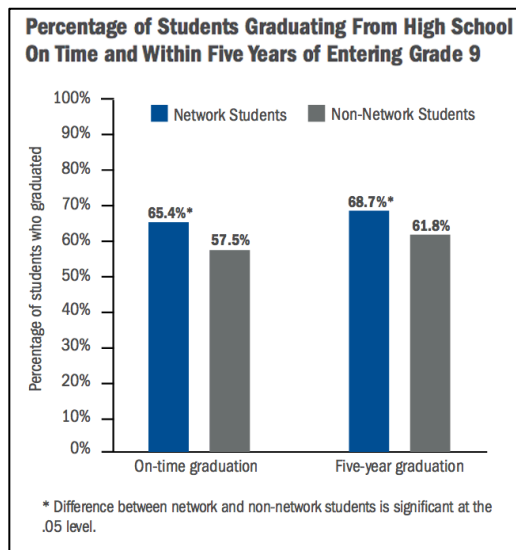
## GRADUATION ADVANTAGE: Deeper Learning Approaches May Boost High School Graduation Rates, According to Updated AIR Study

Students who attend high schools focused on [deeper learning](#) are more likely to graduate than students at other schools, according to a follow-up study from the American Institutes for Research (AIR). The study, *Graduation Advantage Persists for Students in Deeper Learning Network High Schools*, defines deeper learning for students as developing both a set of competencies (mastery of content knowledge; complex problem-solving, communication, and collaboration skills; an understanding of how to learn; and academic mindsets) and a way of learning that promotes these competencies.

In the study, 65.4 percent of students from deeper learning network high schools graduated within four years compared to 57.5 percent of students at “non-network high schools,”<sup>1</sup> as the graph from the report to the right shows. Students from deeper learning network high schools had higher five-year extended graduation rates as well.

The positive effects of attending a deeper learning network school were similar for both male and female students and for both low- and high-achieving students, the report notes.

The study also finds positive effects—albeit smaller—among students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). Among students eligible for FRPL, 60.9 percent of students at deeper learning high schools graduated within four years compared to 56 percent of students at comparison high schools. Meanwhile, among students not eligible for FRPL, 69.7 percent of students at deeper learning high schools graduated within four years versus 56.4 percent of students at comparison high schools.



<sup>1</sup> The report defines non-network high schools as schools located in the same geographic area as the network schools that had comparable student populations, based on student demographics and academic achievement.

This latest study updates findings from AIR’s 2014 *Study of Deeper Learning: Opportunities and Outcomes*, a series of three reports that examine outcomes from a set of high schools associated with ten established networks from across the country that embrace the goals of deeper learning.<sup>1</sup> The 2014 study—funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation—“aimed to determine whether students who attended high schools with a mature . . . and at least moderately well-implemented approach to promoting deeper learning experienced . . . better outcomes than what they would have experienced had they not attended these schools,” the new report explains.

In AIR’s original *Study of Deeper Learning*, students attending deeper learning network high schools (1) reported higher levels of academic engagement, motivation to learn, collaboration skills, and self-efficacy; (2) scored higher on state achievement exams and the PISA-Based Test for Schools;<sup>2</sup> (3) graduated from high school on time at higher rates; and (4) were more likely to enroll in four-year postsecondary institutions than students at comparison high schools.

The new *Graduation Advantage* study expands upon these findings, adding two more matched pairs of deeper learning and comparison high schools and a fourth cohort of students, allowing researchers to analyze graduation data for students who entered ninth grade between School Years 2007–08 and 2010–11. The researchers note, though, that the findings from both studies represent effects “for the particular group of network schools included in the study and cannot be generalized to the larger population of [deeper learning] network schools,” the new report says.

Nonetheless, “[t]he updated results extend our earlier work showing that students attending deeper learning network high schools were more likely to graduate on time than similar students at non-network [sic] schools,” says **Kristina Zeiser, lead author on the new study and a senior researcher at AIR.**

The new report, *Graduation Advantage Persists for Students in Deeper Learning Network High Schools*, is available at <http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Graduation-Advantage-Persists-Deeper-Learning-Report-March-2016-rev.pdf>.

The original *Study of Deeper Learning: Opportunities and Outcomes* series of reports is available at <http://www.air.org/resource/deeper-learning>.

Additional information about deeper learning and the network of schools featured in the reports is available at <http://deeperlearning4all.org>.



### **OUT OF REACH: Greater Income Gaps Between Poor and Middle Class Families May Discourage Boys from Graduating from High School, Says Brookings Paper**

Boys from low-income families who live in areas with greater income inequality are more likely to drop out of high school than similarly disadvantaged boys living in other areas. That finding comes from *Income Inequality, Social Mobility, and the Decision to Drop Out of High School*, a new paper released by the Brookings Institution as part of its conference series and journal on economics.

Furthermore, while [research from the Alliance for Excellent Education](#) shows that high school graduates earn, on average, \$8,000 more per year than high school dropouts, the potential for higher earnings alone is not enough to offset the negative impacts of income inequality and keep students from dropping out of school, according to the Brookings paper.

“This really changes the way economists think about the role of income inequality and incentivizing kids to stay in school,” explains **Melissa Kearney, Brookings nonresident senior fellow, coauthor of the paper, and an economics professor at the University of Maryland.**

The paper examines the connection between income inequality (the extent to which income is distributed unevenly in a location) and social mobility (the likelihood that an individual will move up or down in the income distribution). “Greater educational attainment is a key pathway by which an individual from a low-income background can move up in the income distribution and obtain a middle class life,” the paper explains. So the Brookings researchers focus on the connection between high school dropout rates and the income gaps between households in the bottom (10th percentile) and middle (50th percentile) of the income distribution.

Traditionally, economists believed that income inequality had an “aspirational effect” that incentivized individuals to invest more in themselves to achieve a higher income position in society, explains Kearney. Since higher levels of education typically command higher salaries, greater income inequality must reflect a greater return on educational investment, thereby encouraging students to stay in school.

But “[t]he data is telling us something different,” Kearney explains. “The data is telling us that on average, kids, boys in particular, who are growing up in low-income homes if they’re in a place with greater gaps between the bottom and the middle, they’re less likely to stay in school, they’re less likely to invest in their own education.”

“Instead of incentivizing them to stay in school and invest more in themselves, it’s causing them to think why bother,” she continues. “The middle class life is so far from my own, that maybe it’s not worth it to stay in school because I’m not going to be that person.”

Essentially, greater income inequality creates the *perception* that economic success is unattainable and diminishes the *perceived* value of staying in school for youth from low-income families. Kearney and her coauthor Phillip Levine, an economics professor at Wellesley College, refer to this phenomenon as “economic despair.”

The researchers find that states with greater income inequality have *higher* dropout rates. In states like Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, and the District of Columbia, which have high levels of income inequality, one-quarter or more of students who start high school do not graduate within four years, the paper says. By comparison, less than 10 percent of students do not graduate on time in Vermont, Wisconsin, North Dakota, and Nebraska, states where income is distributed more evenly between poor and middle class households.

Boys from low-income families seem particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of income inequality. “Low-SES [socioeconomic status] boys in high inequality states are almost 6

percentage points more likely to drop out of high school than low-SES boys in low inequality states,” the paper says. Additionally, for boys from low-income families, moving from a low inequality state to a high inequality state increases the likelihood of dropping out of high school by 4.1 percentage points, the paper says. The researchers examine several possible explanations for this link, including residential segregation, disparities in education funding, and demographic composition, among others. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the level of income inequality is the driving force behind the disparate high school dropout rates.

Moreover, academic performance does not appear to affect the decision to drop out of high school for students from low-income families in states with greater income inequality. In states with lower levels of income inequality, 51 percent of high school dropouts cite poor academic performance as a primary reason for leaving school, the paper says. By contrast, only 21 percent of high school dropouts in states with high income inequality leave school because of poor academic performance.

“Although not conclusive, these survey data are broadly consistent with the notion that low-SES boys in more unequal states are more likely to drop out, not because they are struggling academically, but potentially because they perceive a lower return from staying in school,” the paper says. “To improve rates of upward mobility, we need to give economically disadvantaged youth reasons to believe that they can achieve economic success.”

*Income Inequality, Social Mobility, and the Decision to Drop Out of High School* is available at [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/projects/bpea/spring-2016/kearneylevine\\_incomeinequalityupwardmobility\\_conferencedraft.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/projects/bpea/spring-2016/kearneylevine_incomeinequalityupwardmobility_conferencedraft.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; Kristen Loschert; Caroline Waldman; 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](http://www.all4ed.org). Follow the Alliance on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/all4ed](https://www.twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook ([www.facebook.com/all4ed](https://www.facebook.com/all4ed)), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog ([www.all4ed.org/blog](http://www.all4ed.org/blog)).

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<sup>1</sup> The ten networks of schools in the study are Asia Society, Big Picture Learning, ConnectEd, EdVisions Schools, Envision Schools, Expeditionary Learning, High Tech High, Internationals Network for Public Schools, New Tech Network, and New Visions for Public Schools.

<sup>2</sup> The PISA-Based Test for Schools, administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, assesses core content knowledge and complex problem-solving skills.