



From No Child Left Behind to Every Child a Graduate

The realities of global competitiveness, the rapidly diminishing prospects of those students whose high schools fail to prepare them for college and work, and the resulting widening opportunity gap are combining to make middle and high school reform a national imperative. No longer is it merely the right thing to do; improving the country's secondary schools has significant economic, national security, and civil rights implications.

As the nation embraces the idea that all students should graduate from high school prepared for success in college and at work, the gaps in current federal approach to education become clear: federal policy and funding do not effectively support improving achievement in the nation's high schools. But federal leadership is critical in advancing high school reform. Needed now is bold leadership that is appropriate to the crisis and in line with the federal government's tradition of intervening to ensure the security of the nation, reduce poverty and increase equity, and advance research to inform effective practice.

The reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) offers Congress the opportunity to address the "Secondary" in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and to take the crucial first steps toward an appropriate federal role in the national effort to improve America's middle and high schools. Additional clarity is needed to determine what, exactly, that role should entail.

NCLB reauthorization must focus on setting the right goals and providing the right incentives, including effective accountability, to identify and turn around low-performing schools with systemic, research-based solutions. If these critical tasks also take into consideration the valuable lessons that have been learned in states, districts, and schools across the nation over the past several years, future state and local decisionmaking will be enhanced and better supported, and the goal of improving education so that every student succeeds will be reached more efficiently.

The Alliance for Excellent Education believes that federal high school policy must be grounded in the following principles:

- All students must be held to high expectations that will allow them to graduate ready for college and the modern workplace.
- The system must support and leverage an effective and individualized approach at the student and school levels.
- Educators and policymakers must be provided with the necessary data and research to make informed decisions to improve policy and practice.

To these ends, the following recommendations outline the steps that must be taken during the reauthorization of NCLB to begin building that appropriate federal role.

Shared Standards and Assessments Aligned to College and Work Readiness

Currently, about two thirds of the students who enter ninth grade do not graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college and the workplace. But NCLB does little to encourage changes that would improve these outcomes. Instead, it merely requires that schools be held accountable for students attaining reading and math proficiency levels that are often very low (usually tenth grade), and the standards and assessments that measure proficiency are low quality and vary significantly in rigor. To correct this problem and to raise standards, NCLB should advance a state-driven process for developing national education standards to ensure that all students are held to the same high expectations. Such standards must align with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in postsecondary education and in the workplace. The federal government should also support the development of high-quality, performance-based assessments to regularly measure student progress toward those standards and to meet the testing requirements of NCLB (while also removing a significant financial burden from states and increasing the quality of assessments). In addition, the federal government should provide states with incentives and supports for adopting these standards and for aligning key systems (such as curricula, graduation requirements, and professional development) with them.

Accountability for High School Graduation

NCLB set a new standard for accountability by requiring that all students attain proficiency in reading and math. However, the current system does not place enough importance on whether or not those students actually *graduate* from high school. In fact, only 70 percent of the nation's high school students—and far fewer poor and minority students—graduate on time with a regular diploma. Because federal accountability is solely focused on test scores, there is a perverse incentive to “push out” those students least likely to reach proficiency in time for the test. As a result, some high schools actually succeed in meeting the bar of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) while half of their students drop out. But switching to a federal accountability system that gives more credit for graduating than for proficiency is not the solution to the problem—such a system could offer incentives for schools to become “diploma mills,” where students would be allowed to graduate regardless of whether or not they had gained the necessary knowledge and skills. As NCLB is reauthorized, graduation rates must be weighted on par with assessments in determining AYP, and like assessments must be disaggregated and increase over time to ensure that all students graduate.

Secondary School Improvement

NCLB, and in particular Title I of the law, should ensure that states and districts identify and turn around low-performing schools so that all students can succeed. However, the current Title I investment fails to reach most eligible middle and high schools, leaving the vast majority of low-performing secondary schools without the additional supports necessary for successful school improvement. Only 8 percent of the students receiving Title I funds are in high school, and only 15 percent are in middle school. NCLB reauthorization must address this gap by providing a dedicated \$2.5 billion funding stream to improve low-performing high schools using research-based interventions based on a detailed needs analysis. These funds should be distributed to states by formula to leverage in every state a system of differentiated high school improvement that uses rich information about students and schools to inform school improvement decisions. Funding passed on to local education agencies to support districtwide strategies should be used

to ensure that high schools failing to make AYP undertake the targeted interventions or whole school reforms warranted. For those schools beyond repair, funding should be used to replace such schools with well-designed small high schools that help the district create multiple pathways to a college- and work-ready diploma to meet the needs of diverse students. School improvement strategies supported with or required by these funds should reflect what is known about high school improvement from research and best practices. A similar fund should also be established to turn around low-performing middle schools.

Adolescent Literacy

NCLB includes a \$1 billion literacy program targeting students in K–3 known as Reading First. This investment helps make sure that students read and write at grade level or above, but it disappears after third grade—exactly the point when expectations for student literacy are increasing. Unfortunately, this federal literacy policy mirrors the traditional focus across America of teaching reading and writing only to children in the early grades, so it is not surprising that almost 70 percent of eighth-grade students read below grade level. This lack of basic reading skills contributes greatly to at-risk students’ failure to master the material they need to succeed after graduation and increases their likelihood of dropping out entirely. The federal government should build on Reading First by authorizing a \$1 billion Striving Readers program which would provide formula grants to every state to put an adolescent literacy plan in place and to support, at the district level, both professional development and targeted interventions to improve adolescent literacy. This key investment would improve student achievement and high school graduation rates by ensuring that older students who struggle to read at grade level receive the literacy interventions needed to succeed in school.

Innovation and Research

The comprehensive high school of the 1950s was designed to meet the demands of an industrial economy by ensuring that about one third of the students graduated prepared for higher education and a professional track, while another third graduated from high school ready to take the “family-wage” jobs that were then available. Even the remaining third, who dropped out without a high school diploma, could often secure a decent job in the manufacturing sector. The new “knowledge economy,” however, requires that all students graduate from high school prepared for higher education and the twenty-first-century workplace. With 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs requiring some postsecondary education, it is clear that all students must be educated to a higher standard than ever before if they are to thrive. At the same time, that the global economy demands this new skill level for individuals and the nation to succeed, research, technology, and innovation leave educators poised to make breakthroughs in reaching more students. To do so, the K–12 education continuum, the higher education system, and local communities must participate in the development of innovative models to educate all of the nation’s secondary school students to higher standards. NCLB should authorize a \$500 million Secondary School Innovation Fund to support partnerships to create these innovative models in secondary schools that will increase student achievement and prepare *all* students for success in postsecondary education and in the workplace. Such models should be rigorously evaluated for effectiveness in order to receive continued grant funds and support for replication where warranted.

Data Systems to Improve Education

Nearly every industry—e.g., medicine, law, manufacturing, agriculture—has been transformed and improved by the use of data and technology. High-quality data systems are also critical to improving secondary schools across the nation. However, most states and school districts have not yet built such systems. NCLB should include a \$100 million investment in grants to states to build statewide longitudinal data systems in accordance with the principles of the Data Quality Campaign¹, as well as an additional \$100 million in formula grants to states to build the capacity of educators to use data to improve teaching and learning. These systems are essential to informing policy and practice, and every state should be required to have one by 2012 that is, at a minimum, capable of producing the data needed to track an accurate graduation rate.

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These priorities do not cover all aspects of high school reform, but they help to provide a solid foundation for an effective federal role in advancing state and local efforts toward the critical goal of preparing all students for postsecondary education, the workforce, and success in life. Taken together, these recommendations can help to bring the basic NCLB principles—closing achievement gaps and ensuring that all students succeed—into America’s high schools, helping to move the nation from *no child left behind* to *every child a graduate*.

¹ The Data Quality Campaign is a national, collaborative effort to encourage and support state policymakers to improve the collection, availability, and use of high-quality education data and to implement state longitudinal data systems to *improve student achievement*. Additional information is available at www.dataqualitycampaign.org.