

# From No Child Left Behind to Every Child a Graduate



ALLIANCE FOR  
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

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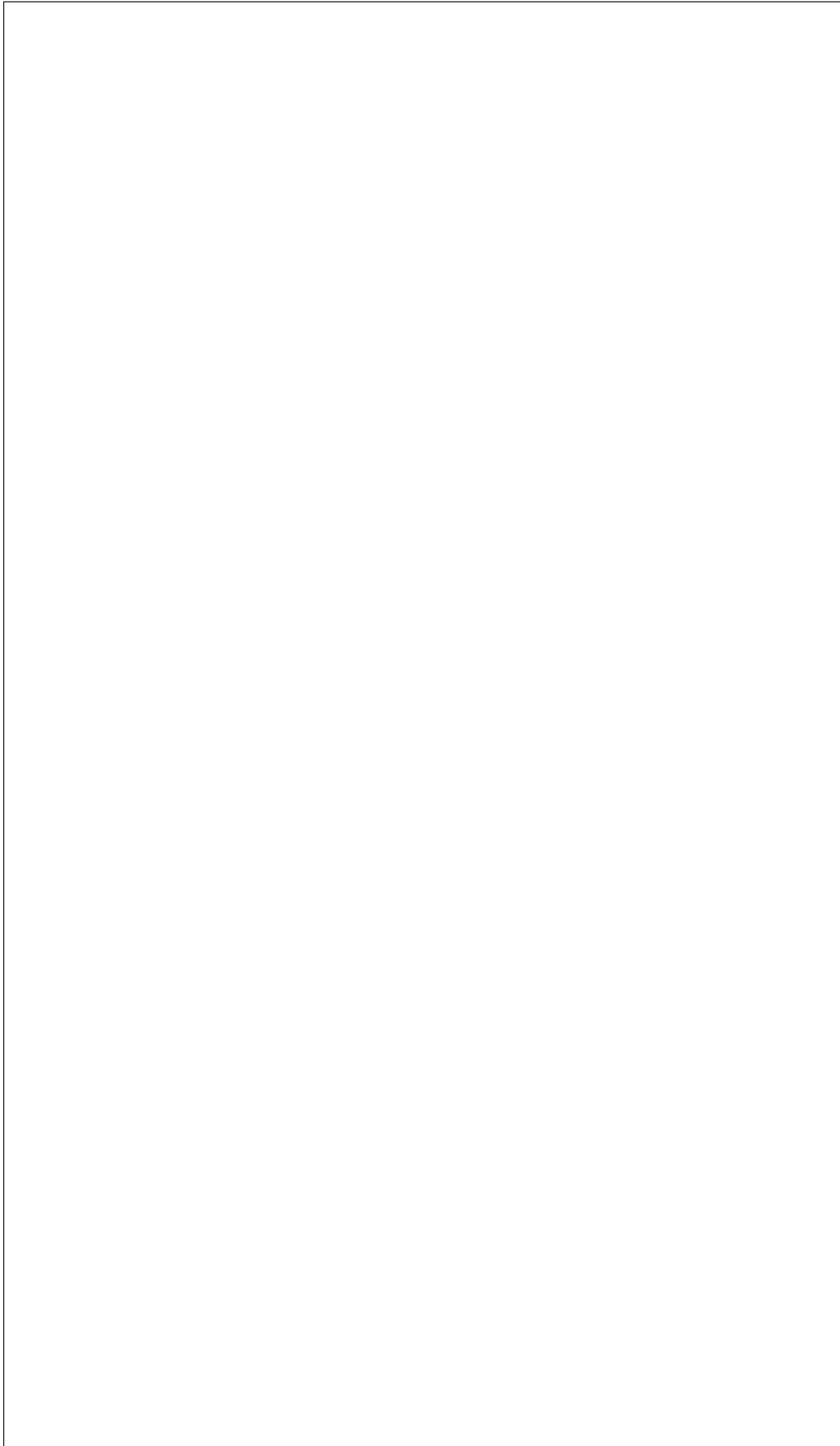
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# From No Child Left Behind to Every Child a Graduate

August 2008





## About the Alliance for Excellent Education

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy, advocacy, and research organization created to help all middle and high school students receive an excellent education.

The Alliance focuses on America's six million most at-risk secondary school students (those in the lowest achievement quartile), who are likely to leave school without a diploma or graduate unprepared for a productive future. Based in Washington, DC, the Alliance works to make it possible for these students to achieve at high academic levels and graduate prepared for college, the modern workplace, and citizenship.

The Alliance's audience includes parents, teachers, and students, as well as the federal, state, and local policy communities, education organizations, the media, and a concerned public. To inform the national debate about education policies and options, the Alliance produces reports and other materials, presents at meetings and conferences, briefs policymakers and the press, and provides timely information to a wide audience through its biweekly newsletter *Straight A's* and its regularly updated website ([www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org)).

## Acknowledgments

In 2002, the Alliance for Excellent Education published *Every Child a Graduate*, one of the first nationally focused efforts to draw attention to the problems in many of the country's middle and high schools, and to encourage federal—as well as state and local—policy reform designed to improve student achievement and attainment. Since that report's release, the knowledge base that informs what is known about both the problems and the ways to solve them has grown dramatically, thanks to the efforts of researchers and educators across the country.

This new report is the result of several years of intensive, thoughtful effort by the Alliance for Excellent Education and the many experts on secondary school improvement who have provided the organization with guidance and advice. It attempts to lay out a new framework for action to improve secondary schools that is predicated on the recognition that, to be effective, reform must be comprehensive and systemic. *Every Child a Graduate* noted that “there is no single strategy for increasing student achievement”; in *From No Child Left Behind to Every Child a Graduate*, the Alliance hopes that it has clearly articulated the complexity of the interrelated efforts that must be put into place if the nation's schools are to effectively prepare all of their students for the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century.

It would be impossible to list and adequately thank all of the individuals whose work and ideas have informed the development of this report. They include, certainly, members of the Alliance's governing board and advisory groups—past and present—and the many other educators, researchers, funders, policy analysts, business and civic leaders, and elected and appointed officials (including members of Congress and their staffs and the appointees and career employees of the U.S. Department of Education) who have provided insight, guidance, and advice over the years. Also appreciated is the belief in the importance of the need for middle and high school improvement

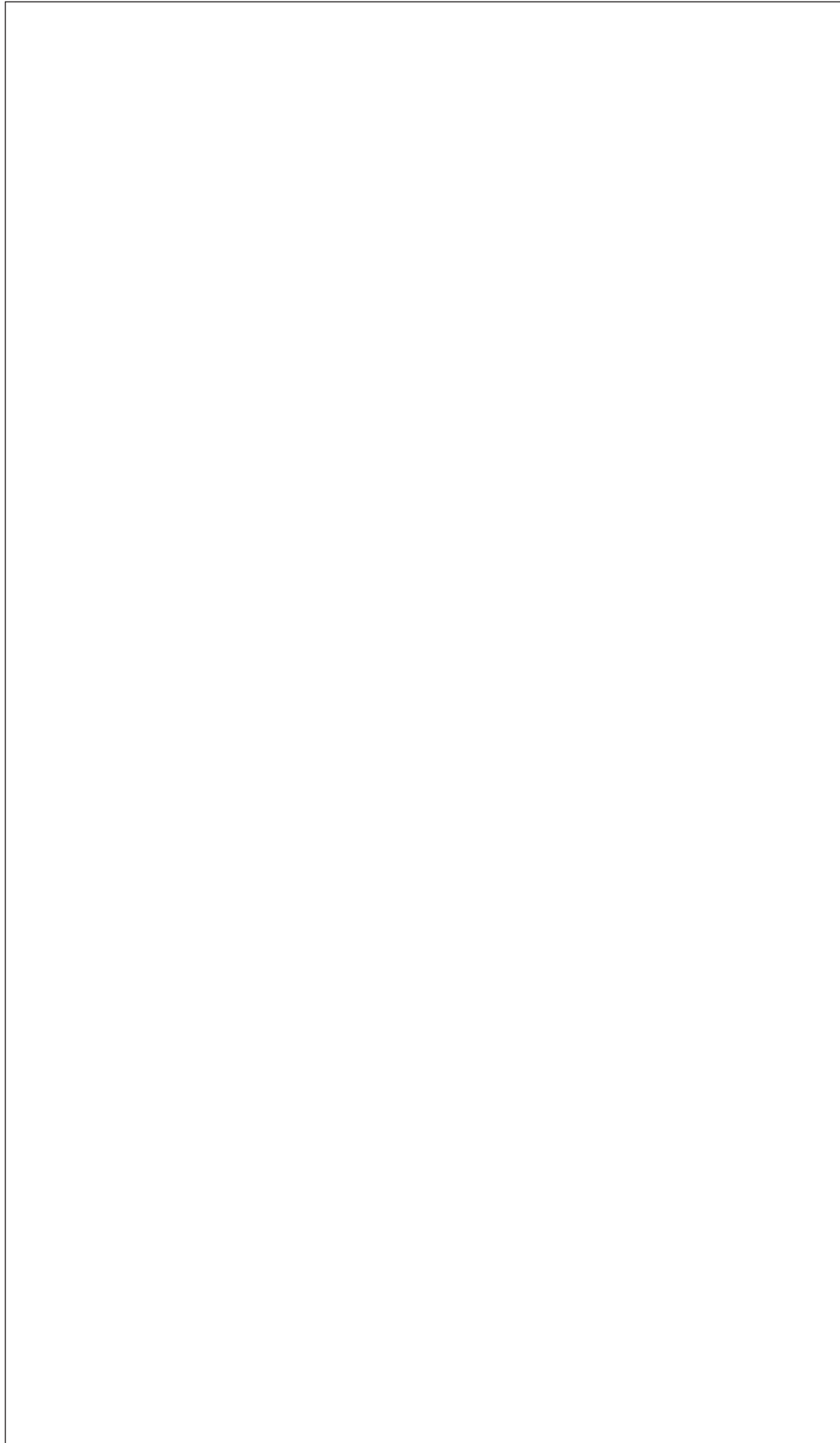
and in the value of the Alliance’s work that has been expressed by parents, community members, and concerned citizens.

Every member of the Alliance for Excellent Education’s staff—those currently with the organization and those who have been a part of it previously—has made a valuable and necessary contribution to the work that has gone into making this report possible. Special thanks go to Lyndsay Pinkus, who devoted countless hours and energy to organizing, writing, and revising much of the text, helping to present complex thoughts and ideas in a coherent and readable format.

Above all, the Alliance for Excellent Education is grateful to its founders, Gerard and Lilo Leeds, and to the entire Leeds family. Their vision and passion, and their unfailing belief that every child should graduate from high school prepared for college, work, and success in life, is an inspiration to all who know and work with them.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

America's secondary schools are failing far too many of their students. Although intensive education reforms directed toward younger children have resulted in higher test scores and a narrowing achievement gap in the early grades, students in their middle and high school years are registering stagnant achievement and mediocre attainment on every national and international measure.

Nationally, only about one third of the students who enter ninth grade each year can expect to graduate four years later having learned what they need to be prepared for postsecondary education or the workforce. Another third will graduate, but without the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college, career training, or entry-level jobs. And the final third will drop out of school before graduation day.

A few of the nation's high schools are educating all of their students well. Many more are doing a good job of providing a good education to some of their students but allowing others to fall through the cracks. And about two thousand—12 percent—of the country's high schools are doing such a poor job of educating their students that researchers call them “dropout factories”; together, these high schools produce about half of the nation's dropouts. They are found in almost every state in the nation, in urban, suburban, and rural communities.

Policymakers and members of the education community generally agree that the problems in America's high schools have reached crisis proportions in recent years. And although the situation affects young people of all races and socioeconomic status, students of color and low-income students are particularly hard hit. While 78 percent of white students graduate from high school on time with a regular diploma, only about 55 percent of African Americans and 58 percent of Hispanics do so.

In an era of rapid globalization, as technology and innovation increasingly impact almost every facet of life in communities throughout the world, it seems inconceivable that the American educational system still relies on a model that was designed to prepare students for life in the middle of the last century. And the consequences of allowing it to continue functioning this way are frightening, both for the students themselves and for the nation at large, which must be able to count on today's students to become the productive workers, thinkers, and leaders of tomorrow.

Policymakers and members of the education community generally agree that the problems in America's high schools have reached crisis proportions in recent years.

The implications of not acting are dire. It has long been accepted by Americans that a good education is the key to success and advancement in society. Improving education is certainly linked to improving equity and equality. It is also linked to improving the country's economic condition in a number of ways; to take just one example, if the students in the class of 2008 who dropped out had stayed in school and graduated, the nation would have benefited from an additional \$319 billion in wages, taxes, and productivity over the course of their lifetimes.

The good news is that much is already known about how to improve the secondary educational system, and more is being discovered every day. The nation can begin now to transform all of the nation's middle and high schools into effective centers of teaching and learning. The process will be neither easy nor fast. But the research-based solutions and best practices that have been and are being developed and demonstrated in pockets of excellence around the nation prove that success is possible if the will to effect comprehensive and sustained reform is present.

If the nation's preeminent position in the world is to be maintained, every level of government and all segments of society must actively work to transform the country's dysfunctional or lackluster secondary schools into vibrant and exciting institutions that challenge students and teachers alike to achieve at the highest levels. In particular—because this is a national problem that demands a national response—federal policymakers have a critical role to play in assuring that secondary school improvement efforts are clear, accountable, and well designed, and have sufficient resources to provide an excellent education to all of America's students.

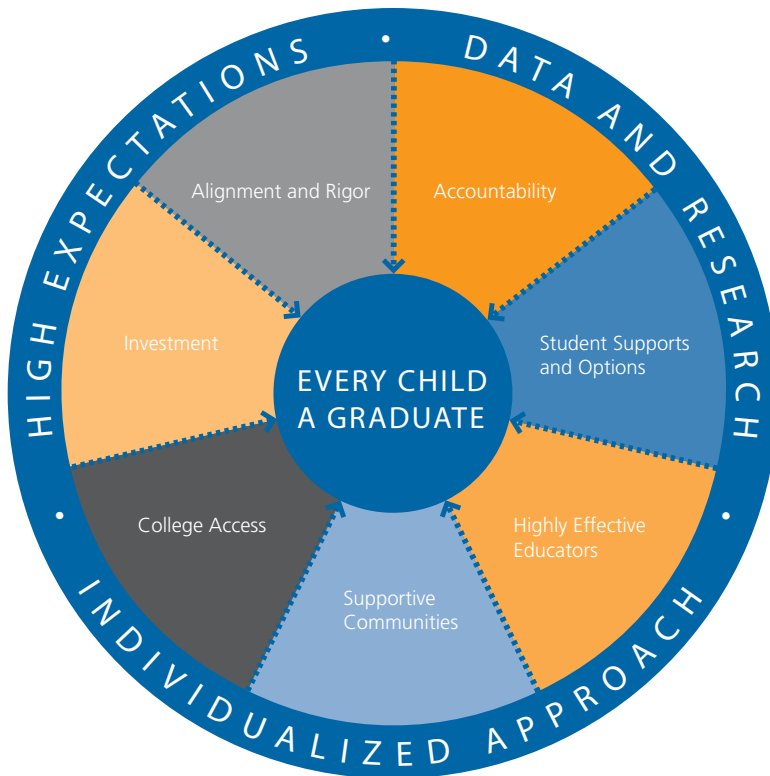
There are no silver bullets. Transforming schools and educating all students well requires thoughtful, coordinated, *systemic* change. To ensure that all children graduate with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in the twenty-first century, decisionmakers must be guided by a core group of principles that are critical to effective policy change:

- 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 so that both the path to the diploma and the efforts to turn around low-performing high schools are successful.
- Educators and policymakers must be provided the **data and research** necessary to make informed decisions to improve policy and practice.

The Alliance for Excellent Education's Framework for Action to Improve Secondary Schools (illustrated in the graphic on page 3) reflects the consensus among educators, researchers, policymakers, and other authorities on the specific problems of secondary schools, as well as on the research- and best-practice-supported solutions to those problems. Taken together, the seven policy areas contained within the framework offer a comprehensive and systemic approach to secondary school reform. While the appropriate level of federal involvement varies from element to element, all seven areas are critical to achieving national objectives.

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Taken together, the seven policy areas contained within the framework offer a comprehensive and systemic approach to secondary school reform.



- **Alignment and Rigor:** Demand high, common expectations for every student by ensuring that standards, curriculum, assessments, and accountability systems are aligned with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college and the workplace and as a citizen.
- **Accountability:** Support valid high school accountability systems designed to measure student and system performance; foster good practice and mitigate bad practice; and identify and direct resources and reforms to improve teaching, learning, and outcomes for all students.
- **Student Supports and Options:** Ensure that every student has access to an engaging, rigorous, options-based course of study and the supports and interventions necessary for success.
- **Highly Effective Educators:** Ensure that every classroom and school is led by an effective teacher and principal.
- **Supportive Communities:** Leverage community-based services and opportunities to provide every student with the academic and nonacademic supports necessary for academic success.
- **College Access:** Guarantee that every high school student has the academic, financial, and other tools necessary for access to and success in postsecondary education.
- **Investment:** Drive financial and human resources to where they are needed most by ensuring that those resources are allocated equitably and adequately and used efficiently and effectively.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization with the mission of promoting high school transformation to make it possible for every child to graduate prepared for postsecondary education and success in life. In this report, the Alliance calls on policymakers, officials, educators, and other stakeholders to put appropriate federal policies—which support and/or encourage good practice at every level—into place and to coordinate and align them across local, state, and federal levels. Only then can a comprehensive national solution to the crisis in America’s high schools be achieved. Only then can the nation be assured that its students are receiving the excellent education they deserve and society demands. Only then can the nation move from the idea of “no child left behind” to the reality of “every child a graduate.”

## A NATIONAL CRISIS IN AMERICA'S HIGH SCHOOLS

**Because it is not preparing all students for twenty-first-century success, America's public education system is not meeting the needs of the nation.**

Every available indicator tells the same story: much of America's public education system, particularly at the secondary school level, is failing. A number of measures—state, national, and international assessments in math and reading; graduation rates; college entry, remediation, and college completion rates; and employer surveys—show that too many students are leaving the K–12 system without having mastered the knowledge and skills that are needed for success after high school.

For years, reform and attention have been concentrated on improving the academic outcomes of younger children—those of preschool age and in the elementary grades—and these efforts are beginning to show results. But the achievement gains of younger students are not being sustained as they continue through their educational careers. By the middle grades, many children are falling behind. By the time those students reach high school, a true crisis has emerged in many schools in communities throughout the nation.

Only about one third of the students who enter ninth grade each year graduate four years later with the knowledge and

skills needed for postsecondary education or the modern workforce. Another third graduate, but—as the box on page 6 shows—their diploma does not mean they are academically prepared for the future. The final third simply drop out of high school before graduation day. Between the students who drop out and the students who receive a diploma but lack critical skills, almost two thirds of each class of entering ninth graders leave high school unprepared for success in college or work.<sup>1</sup>

These percentages translate into startlingly high numbers: each year, approximately 1.2 million students<sup>2</sup> fail to graduate from high school on time with a regular diploma.<sup>3</sup> That means that every school day, roughly seven thousand American high school students become dropouts.

About half of these dropouts attend one of the nearly two thousand high schools identified by researchers at Johns Hopkins University as “dropout factories.” In these schools, the typical freshman class

<sup>1</sup> The term “regular high school diploma” means the standard high school diploma awarded to the preponderance of students in a state that is fully aligned with state standards, or a higher diploma, such as an honors diploma. It does not include GEDs, certificates of attendance, or any certificate that does not fully align with the state's standards and graduation requirements.

Every school day, roughly seven thousand American high school students become dropouts.

## Graduating Unprepared

**Each year, roughly 70 percent of students graduate from high school on time with a regular diploma.<sup>3</sup> This should signify that they have mastered the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed in life beyond high school. Too often, however, this is not the case.**

- **Core skills:** A majority of the nation’s twelfth graders read and do math below grade level.<sup>4</sup>
- **College readiness:** Only half of the 1.4 million 2008 ACT-tested high school graduates were ready for college-level reading.<sup>5</sup>
- **College entry:** Despite the fact that 82 percent of high school students say they expect to attend college,<sup>6</sup> fewer than 40 percent of ninth graders enroll in college four years later.<sup>7</sup>

- **Remediation:** In order to participate in college classes, 42 percent of public community college freshmen and 20 percent of freshmen in public four-year institutions need to take remedial courses in basic skills such as reading, writing, and math.<sup>8</sup>
- **College success:** About 56 percent of full-time students seeking a BA earn their degree within six years of first enrolling in a four-year program.<sup>9</sup>
- **Work readiness:** Employers consistently express strong disappointment in the skills of high school graduates who are hired for entry-level positions.<sup>10</sup> For example, about 60 percent of American manufacturing companies say that high school graduates are poorly prepared for typical entry-level jobs.<sup>11</sup>

Dropout factories produce 69 percent of all African American dropouts, and 63 percent of all Hispanic dropouts.

The averaging of test scores and flawed ways of measuring graduation rates have often obscured the reality that even schools perceived as “good” by the community may be doing a poor job of educating some groups of students.

has shrunk by 40 percent or more by the time the students reach their senior year. These high schools serve large numbers of minority and low-income students, and have fewer resources and less-qualified teachers than schools in more-affluent neighborhoods with larger numbers of white students. The schools produce 69 percent of all African American dropouts, and 63 percent of all Hispanic dropouts.<sup>12</sup>

The other half of the nation’s dropouts can be found in schools across the nation, including some that may appear, at first glance, to be doing a reasonably good job of preparing and graduating their students. But the averaging of test scores and flawed ways of measuring graduation rates have often obscured the reality that even schools perceived as “good” by the community may be doing a poor job of educating some groups of students.

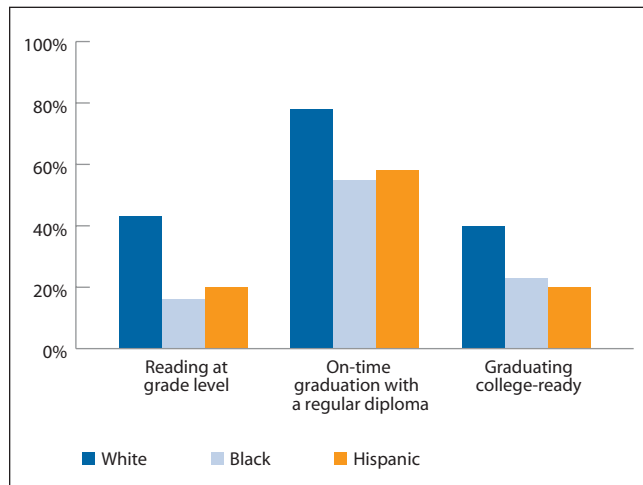
By every measure of educational achievement, poor and minority students fare worse in most American schools than their peers. Only about 55 percent of black students and 58 percent of Hispanic students graduate on time from high

school with a regular diploma, compared to 78 percent of whites.<sup>13</sup> (See box on page 7.) These stubborn achievement gaps have permeated the education system and the psyche of the American public for decades. As noted recently by the National Education Association, “For far too many poor and minority children, ‘at risk’ describes their fate and not simply their circumstances.”<sup>14</sup>

Some secondary schools are, of course, educating all of their students to relatively high standards and graduating them prepared for what lies ahead. But far too many are producing mediocre or abysmal results for some or all of their students. Whether they are struggling in chronically underperforming schools or being left behind in otherwise successful schools, too many students are being failed by America’s public school system, particularly when they reach the middle and high school grades.

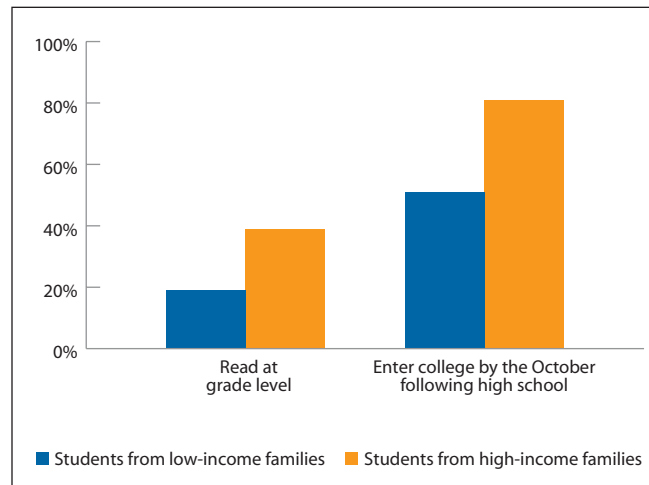
### Academic Outcomes for Poor and Minority Students

Large gaps in achievement continue to exist between white students and their African American and Hispanic classmates. The white-black and white-Hispanic achievement gap in eighth-grade reading has remained virtually unchanged over the past fifteen years.<sup>15</sup>



- Roughly 16 percent of black twelfth graders and 20 percent of Hispanic twelfth graders read at grade level or above, compared to 43 percent of white twelfth graders.<sup>16</sup>
- Only about 55 percent of black students and 58 percent of Hispanic students graduate on time from high school with a regular diploma, compared to 78 percent of whites.<sup>17</sup>
- Only 20 percent of Hispanic students and 23 percent of African American students graduate prepared for college, compared to 40 percent of white students.<sup>18</sup>

Students from low-income families are often at greatest risk of dropping out or graduating unprepared for college or work. Low-income twelfth graders read at approximately the same level as more-affluent eighth graders.<sup>19</sup>



- Only 19 percent of twelfth graders from low-income families read at grade level or higher, compared to 39 percent of their high-income peers.<sup>20</sup>
- High school students living in low-income families drop out of school at six times the rate of their peers from high-income families.<sup>21</sup>
- While 81 percent of high school completers from high-income families enroll in college the October immediately following high school, only 51 percent of completers from low-income families do so.<sup>22</sup>

**Perhaps these outcomes should not be surprising. After all, the nation’s secondary schools were not designed to meet the challenges or goals of the twenty-first century.**

In fact, U.S. high schools are performing quite well for the society they were created to serve, in an era characterized by the telegraph, gaslights, and horse-drawn vehicles.

In the late 1800s, as the United States moved from a primarily agrarian to a manufacturing economy, the country

required a citizenry with increased skills and knowledge and a generation of leaders to guide society in the “changing climate of business, urban infrastructure, and cultural diversity.”<sup>23</sup> Education and policy leaders agreed that more young people—an estimated 15 to 20 percent—needed an extended educational experience that raised educational standards and added more years of schooling beyond eighth grade, and the number of public high schools began to increase in order to serve this

In 1900, only 10 percent of the nation's fourteen- to seventeen-year-old population attended high school.

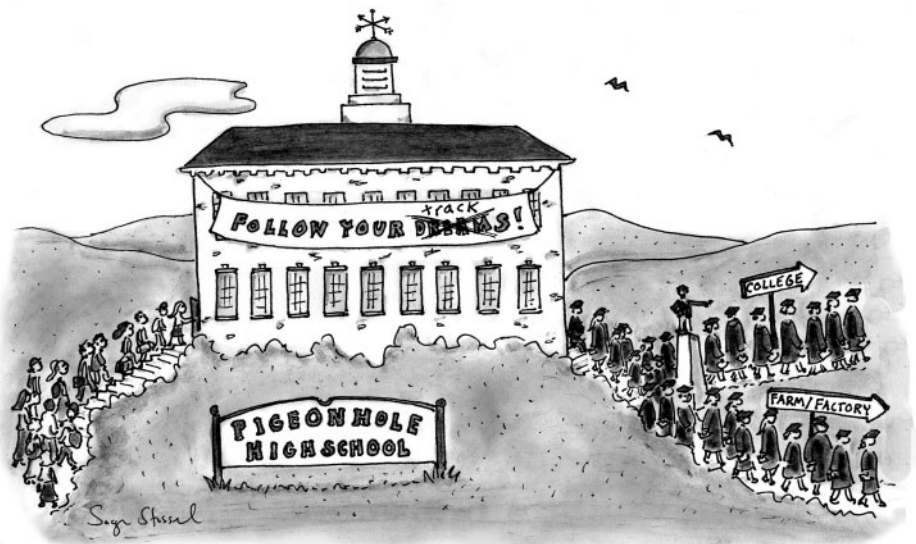
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population. As the economy continued to evolve, as strict child labor laws were passed, and as migration from rural areas to cities escalated, students and families increasingly saw a high school education as critical to success in the changing society. In 1900, only 10 percent of the nation's fourteen- to seventeen-year-old population attended high school; twenty years later, 31 percent were enrolled.<sup>24</sup>

Decades later, the United States faced a new set of challenges, with implications for the education system. Following the surprise launch of *Sputnik* by the Soviet Union in 1957, criticism of American high schools spurred a high-profile debate about problems in secondary education. Soon after, retired Harvard President James Conant proposed that the American public high school be a democratic, egalitarian place, responsible for preparing all students for life in the second half of the twentieth century. He envisioned large, comprehensive high schools that grouped students by "performance, inclinations, and ambitions" into one of two categories: those students needing academic

preparation for college, professional careers, and managerial roles; and those students needing practical subjects for manufacturing and agricultural jobs in the industrial economy. Conant's vision triggered the explosion of large, comprehensive high schools that functioned as giant sorting machines for America's youth.

The mid-1950s brought other changes, as well, to the way American high schools were structured and operated. A few weeks before the *Sputnik* launch, for instance, the Arkansas National Guard, on the order of the state's governor, surrounded Little Rock's Central High School to keep nine black students from entering the school, despite the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregated schools were unconstitutional. In response, in one of the most significant moments in the history of the civil rights movement, President Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne Division into Little Rock to ensure that the students could enter the school safely. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, the concept of equity in education was defined by desegregation



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and the desire to enroll all students, regardless of race, in integrated schools.

But the world has evolved considerably over the past fifty years. The National High School Alliance described the national economic changes in this way:

*The challenges that face America as it enters a new millennium ... bear little resemblance to those that faced the nation [in the 1950s]. Today, commercial products can be designed in one country, engineered in a second, manufactured in a third, assembled in a fourth, and distributed from anywhere on the globe... [M]odern technologies make communications instantaneous, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Industries that once effortlessly absorbed high school dropouts into high-paying, low-skill jobs on assembly lines or doing piecework have invested heavily in technologies to automate these functions and moved many tasks offshore where labor is cheaper. Jobs that once provided secure employment can now be performed as readily in Dublin or Delhi as in Dayton or Denver.<sup>25</sup>*

Despite these changes, most of today's high schools still reflect Conant's fifty-year-old design. As a result, they are better suited to serve an economic reality that no longer exists, and to meet outdated expectations of equity. In today's global and entrepreneurial economy, it is no longer enough to ensure that all students can walk through the entrance doors of any high school they choose; now, every student, regardless of race, disability, or socioeconomic status, must also be able to walk out of the building with a meaningful diploma, prepared for success in the twenty-first century.

**The mission of the public education system must shift from "Educate some and prepare them for the twentieth-century American economy" to "Educate all and prepare them for the twenty-first-century global economy."**

The changing economic, equity, and security realities of the nation and the

world mean that American society is demanding more from its public school system. But the system has not responded with corresponding changes to ensure that it meets those goals.

- No longer do the residents of American towns and cities compete for jobs only with each other; their competitors today are often across the globe. Worries about outsourcing are not only concerns for manufacturing workers; accountants, medical technicians, insurance agents, and financial analysts' jobs also are moving overseas or being replaced by computer automation.<sup>26</sup> Despite this reality, students are prepared differently from state to state, and even from classroom to classroom. Expectations about what students should learn are dependent on their state of residence, zip code, and curriculum track rather than a common understanding of the skills, content, and competencies necessary for success in postsecondary education, the modern workplace, and the global economy.
- Today, every student needs a high school diploma as a career starting point, and a college education can no longer be reserved for an elite class of thinkers. Over the last few years, there has been a merging of the definitions of college preparedness and work readiness,<sup>27</sup> demonstrated in part by the fact that almost 90 percent of the fastest-growing and highest-paying jobs require at least some postsecondary training.<sup>28</sup> Yet access to a curriculum that readies students for college and work is inequitably distributed, and in many states there are vast gaps between high school graduation requirements and college expectations. As a result, many students lack the academic and financial tools necessary to have access to and success in postsecondary education.
- There is national agreement, rhetorically at least, that educational opportunity must be offered equally to all American

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children. But the most-challenged students are often concentrated in the lowest-performing schools, in the lowest-income areas, with the fewest resources and the least-experienced educators. Students and educators alike struggle against enormous odds to succeed despite the often deplorable conditions in these schools.

- Despite an increasingly diverse student body, and the expectation that students' demographic background should not be a determinate of nor a barrier to their success, many high school educators do not have the training, tools, or time for the collaboration that is necessary to address the wide-ranging academic, cultural, linguistic, cognitive, and socioeconomic needs of their students.
- With the new need to prepare all students for postsecondary success, the system must be designed to ensure that every student is engaged in his or her education and supported all the way through high school to graduation. The typical high school experience—characterized by inflexible scheduling, rigid course options and

sequences, and teachers lecturing to a roomful of students who are taking handwritten notes—must be replaced by a teaching and learning process that is student-centric, reflecting the highly personalized, decentralized, and technology-rich lives children lead outside the classroom.

- Nearly every other industry—medicine, sales, manufacturing, and agriculture, for example—has been transformed and improved in recent years by the use of data and technology. But most educators still operate in uninformed silos, without sufficient research, data, and time for collaboration to guide their practice.

The nation's education system, and its middle and high schools in particular, must be fundamentally and comprehensively redesigned to respond to the needs of the twenty-first century. Only through systemic reform that addresses the academic, civil rights, economic, technological, and social changes that have occurred over the past decades can successful outcomes for all students be possible.

The nation's education system, and its middle and high schools in particular, must be fundamentally and comprehensively redesigned to respond to the needs of the twenty-first century.

## THE CASE FOR A NATIONAL RESPONSE

**A secondary school system that does not meet the needs of all students has implications for individuals, communities, states, and the country; it is a national problem that requires a national response.**

Education is the one public service that, as commentator John Begala noted in a 2002 article in *School Administrator*, is “associated with practically every economic, social, public health and civic strength, and its absence or failure is associated with nearly every economic, social, health and civic problem.”<sup>29</sup> Given these dynamics, described in more detail below, and the continuous changes in the global economy and workforce that challenge America’s competitiveness, there is no question that the often mediocre to abysmal performance of the country’s secondary schools is a national problem that requires a national strategy.

### Breaking the cycles of inequity

The stubborn achievement gap between poor and minority students and their peers is, quite simply, a civil rights issue, and must be addressed. Whether they are struggling in chronically underperforming schools or in pockets of failure within otherwise successful schools, these students are frequently being left behind. In communities with high schools in which dropping out is more common than graduating, daily socioeconomic challenges run parallel

to academic challenges. For students in those communities, education is the only ticket to a brighter future for themselves and their families. Addressing the crisis in America’s high schools is a necessary strategy for breaking the cycle of poor education and entrenched poverty both for individuals and their communities.

### Reducing the economic costs of failure

There is a well-documented earnings gap between high school graduates and dropouts. It is also becoming increasingly more difficult for individuals with only a high school diploma to find stable, well-paying employment. In 2005, high school dropouts earned, on average, \$9,634 a year less than high school graduates.<sup>30</sup> Over a lifetime, the difference between the earnings of a high school dropout and a college graduate is more than \$1 million.<sup>31</sup> Individuals with less education generally are less healthy and die earlier. They are also more likely to become parents when very young, become embroiled in the criminal justice system, or need social welfare assistance from government and other agencies.<sup>32</sup>

Addressing the crisis in America’s high schools is a necessary strategy for breaking the cycle of poor education and entrenched poverty both for individuals and their communities.

### Improving America's High Schools and Raising Graduation Rates Would Provide Economic Benefits to the Nation

- If the number of high school dropouts were cut in half, U.S. taxpayers could reap \$45 billion annually in extra tax revenues and reduced costs of public health, crime, justice, and welfare payments.<sup>36</sup>
- The average lifetime benefit in terms of additional taxes paid per expected high school graduate is \$139,100.<sup>37</sup>
- If by 2020 Hispanic, African American, and Native American students graduated from high school and college at the same levels as white students, the potential increase in personal income across the nation would add more than \$310 billion to the U.S. economy.<sup>38</sup>
- A 5 percent increase in the male graduation rate would lead to a combination of savings and revenue of nearly \$8 billion in reduced crime spending and increased earnings each year.<sup>39</sup>
- The average lifetime public health savings per expected high school graduate (achieved through reduction in Medicaid and Medicare costs) is \$40,500.<sup>40</sup>
- Being a high school graduate is associated with a 40 percent lower probability of using Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and a 19 percent lower probability of receiving food stamps.<sup>41</sup>

Note: These costs and benefits should not be aggregated.

Each class of high school dropouts costs the U.S. economy more than \$319 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity over those students' lifetimes.

These costs are borne not just by individuals, but also by the communities in which they live, and by society as a whole. Each class of high school dropouts costs the U.S. economy more than \$319 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity over those students' lifetimes, and about \$17 billion in Medicaid and uninsured medical costs over the same period.<sup>33</sup> One third of employers have to provide their entry-level employees with remedial basic skills training, at an average cost of \$500 per employee, according to one

survey.<sup>34</sup> Department of Defense studies show that less than half of high school dropouts finish the first term of military enlistment (compared to 80 percent of graduates), costing the U.S. Army the wasted investment in recruitment and training.<sup>35</sup> The potential positive impact of graduating more students from high school is demonstrated by looking at just a few of the benefits that would accrue to the economy if the graduation rate were increased (see box above).



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## Preparing individuals for twenty-first-century employability

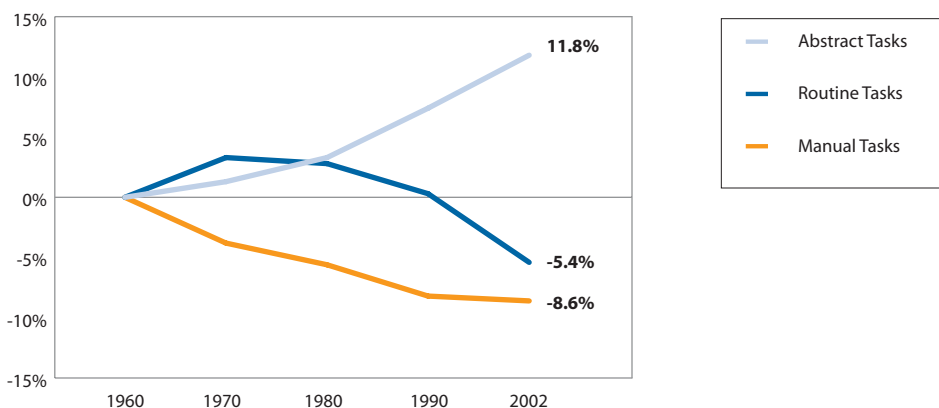
As society evolves and the labor market adjusts accordingly, the skills demanded of those employed in the workforce change. This is particularly true of the recent impact that computerization and globalization have had on the American workforce. First, the occupational mix has changed, as some U.S.-based jobs that can be automatized or shipped overseas have been eliminated here at home; at the same time, new jobs in the technology sector have been created. Second, the skills demanded by current jobs in various sectors have changed. For example, the evolution and computerization of automobile electronics means that mechanics now need to have advanced reading skills, the knowledge to work with computerized testing equipment, and the ability to solve problems using abstract digital models. The graph below illustrates how this task distribution has changed dramatically over the last fifteen years. As a result of these changes, the availability of jobs requiring limited skills and little critical-thinking ability—blue-collar and

clerical jobs that supported much of the middle class for decades—have all but disappeared. Without the training and education to compete for the higher-skilled jobs, these moderately skilled workers are forced to compete for the lower-paying jobs at the bottom end of the skills spectrum (such as janitorial, security, and service jobs) that cannot be replaced by computerization or shipped overseas.<sup>42</sup>

This is of particular concern because the segment of the population that is the least well educated is also the fastest growing. As recently described by the nonprofit national testing organization the Education Testing Service, three converging socioeconomic forces will soon result in a population that contains more people with less education and lower skill levels, including substantial disparities in math and reading skill levels, widening wage gaps, and sweeping demographic shifts.<sup>43</sup> Unaddressed, this trend will mean significant reductions in the knowledge and skill levels of the U.S. workforce as a whole. It will also translate over time into dramatically lower personal income levels, leading to a reduced tax base for the nation and the states.

Converging socioeconomic forces will soon result in a population that contains more people with less education and lower skill levels, including substantial disparities in math and reading skill levels, widening wage gaps, and sweeping demographic shifts.

**Changes in the Tasks Carried out by the U.S. Workforce: 1969–2002**



Source: D. Autor, F. Levy, and R. Murnane, "The Skill Content of Recent Technological Change: An Empirical Exploration," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118, no. 4 (2003). Figure was updated by Autor in 2008.

“The best economic stimulus package is a high school diploma.”

If the United States is to improve its capacity to compete in the global economy, it must have an education system that has the ability to meet the fast-growing demand for high-level skills.

In a continually changing economy, the public education system must adapt to what these occupational changes mean for the skills required of workers. If students are to graduate from high school prepared to be productive members of the U.S. workforce, they must be armed with the advanced skills needed to learn, adapt, and excel in the current and future economy. In addition to strong content knowledge, graduates—whether they continue their education or immediately enter the workforce—are increasingly expected to be skilled in critical thinking and problem solving, as well as in communication and collaboration. They are expected to have initiative and self-direction, and to display leadership and responsibility.<sup>44</sup> Equipping all students with these diverse and essential skills will require changes in expectations and instruction. The demand to develop and maintain an employable workforce is even more urgent now, as economic uncertainty threatens the nation. As noted by Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise, “The best economic stimulus package is a high school diploma.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Maintaining America’s global competitiveness**

Many other nations are already adapting to the changes in the world economy, improving their education systems, and creating significant competition for American workers. A recent avalanche of reports<sup>46</sup> from business and education groups documenting the major technological, economic, and demographic changes across the globe have created an awareness of the need to increase “American competitiveness.” The indicators used

to describe this challenge “range from measurable declines in American innovation, such as patents and scientific articles, to soaring numbers of students in Asia majoring in these fields, to U.S. students’ lagging interest and measured performance in math and science.”<sup>47</sup> If the United States is to improve its capacity to compete in the global economy, it must have an education system that has the ability to meet the fast-growing demand for high-level skills.

For years, the United States was known as the nation with the world’s premier education system. Unfortunately, results from recent international analyses comparing American students to their peers abroad demonstrate that today’s students (and the American education system) are falling behind. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), developed and administered every three years by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),<sup>b</sup> is one of the few available tools for regularly and directly comparing the quality of educational outcomes across countries. Not only does the PISA measure base knowledge, it also gauges the capacity of fifteen-year-old students across the world to *apply* what they’ve learned in the classroom in order to analyze, reason, and communicate effectively. The new world market demands this ability to apply learned content and skills to real-world situations, making PISA an invaluable measure of students’ preparation for the twenty-first-century economy. But on the

<sup>b</sup> OECD is a highly respected membership organization financed by thirty industrialized democracies. The 2006 PISA assessment included participation by all thirty of the OECD member nations and an additional twenty-seven partner nations; in total, these fifty-seven nations make up almost 90 percent of the world economy.

most recent PISA assessments,<sup>c</sup> which compared American fifteen-year-olds to those in other developed nations, U.S. students ranked twenty-fifth of thirty in mathematics literacy, twenty-first of thirty in scientific literacy, fifteenth of twenty-nine in reading literacy, and twenty-fourth of twenty-nine in problem solving.<sup>48</sup> OECD analysts found that, compared to its peers, the U.S. education system has higher-than-average performance gaps between socioeconomic groups, significant gaps in performance between schools, and high proportions of low-performing students.<sup>49</sup>

The U.S. is losing ground on other indicators as well. Until the early 1960s, the United States had the highest high school completion rates among OECD member nations, but by 2005 had slipped to eighteenth out of twenty-three member nations with available data. Similarly, in college graduation rates the United States has slipped from second to fifteenth among OECD member nations with available data.<sup>50</sup> The country's once-superior school system has lost its competitive edge—not because its education outcomes are getting worse, but because they are stagnating as others progress. Even a recent report from the World Economic Forum (WEF) ranking the United States first out of 131 nations in its Global Competitiveness Index—due to the “efficiency of its markets, the sophistication of the business community, the impressive capacity for technological innovation,”<sup>51</sup> among other factors—observed troubling signs of weakness. For instance, the WEF ranks the United States thirty-fourth in health

and primary education and notes that “an inadequately educated workforce” is the fifth most problematic factor for doing business in the United States, just a tenth of a point behind inflation (tax rates, tax regulations, and an inefficient government bureaucracy are numbers one through three).<sup>52</sup> Additionally, as prominent economists Eric Hanushek, Dean Jamison, Eliot Jamison, and Ludger Woessmann have recently described, there is a clear link between higher levels of cognitive skill—defined as “the performance of students on tests in math and science”—and economic growth; the researchers found that a highly skilled workforce can raise economic growth by about two thirds of a percentage point every year. Their findings suggest that if the United States were able to increase its average PISA performance to score at levels similar to the highest-scoring nations, the United States gross domestic product would also increase significantly.<sup>53</sup>

### National problems require national solutions

Ensuring civil rights, reducing taxpayer costs, increasing economic opportunity, creating job security, and maintaining international competitiveness are all national concerns. As a result, the United States faces a stark choice. It can do nothing to fundamentally change the way it educates its students and thus continue an educational decline that will inevitably lead to a weaker nation with a lower standard of living. Or it can summon its collective resources to face this challenge head on, with smart solutions and adequate resources, to place the nation on a trajectory toward a thriving national economy and a vibrant society for all of its citizens.

The country's once-superior school system has lost its competitive edge—not because its education outcomes are getting worse, but because they are stagnating as others progress.

<sup>c</sup> Mathematics literacy and scientific literacy rankings are from the 2006 PISA assessment. A printing error invalidated the U.S. reading section of the 2006 assessment, so the reading literacy ranking is from the 2003 assessment. Problem solving was last included in the 2003 assessment.

## **The Federal Role: An Appropriate, Complementary, and Necessary Partner in a National Strategy**

For more than two hundred years the federal government has provided critical support for educational improvement that has reflected national needs and interests. In order to develop an educated populace that supports a strong democracy, the federal government has traditionally taken action for three specific reasons: to reduce poverty, increase equity, and serve the most disadvantaged; to ensure national security and economic and competitive position; and to advance research that supports state and district innovation, policies, and practices.

The education community has increasingly recognized that thoughtful federal action is a critical component in the systemic reform of the nation's secondary schools. By motivating and providing incentives and support to states and districts, federal policy can facilitate effective, comprehensive change. Even federal policymakers themselves are increasingly embracing this responsibility by acknowledging the urgent need to do something to improve secondary schools and student outcomes.

However, thoughtful federal policy must reflect the complex nature of the federal-state-local structure that comprises the nation's education system. The roles and responsibilities of all three levels of government must be defined to capitalize on their individual strengths. In the case of federal policy, there are discrete activities in which the federal government can and should be the primary actor. For other purposes, federal policy should set parameters and provide guidance to ensure that taxpayer dollars are being used in accordance with research and best practice. And for the many things that the federal government cannot effectively do but for which there is a compelling national interest, there can and should be incentives for action by others. A balanced approach in which all actors—federal, state, and local—play appropriate and effective roles is needed.

As an organization focused on building federal policy to address these issues, the Alliance for Excellent Education holds the following core beliefs about the appropriate role for the federal government in education policy.

- Federal policies must do no harm to effective policies and practices already in place at the state and local levels; rather, they should build on those successes by complementing, encouraging, and supporting them at the federal level. Essentially, good practice must inform policy, with the goal of improving the realities that students and educators face daily.
- New and revised policies must build on the historic reasons for federal involvement in the educational process, but also must expand to reflect the urgent national imperative to improve the educational outcomes of all students in the era of globalization.
- Resources must be adequate and equitable so that children with greater needs receive additional resources.
- The federal government should help elevate the importance of education and the quality and status of educators.
- Federal policy must support a comprehensive approach to secondary school reform based on data, research, and best practices from both this nation and the highest-performing countries in the world.

More specifically, the Alliance believes federal policy should

- ensure equitable access to educational opportunity for the neediest students and high schools;
- provide accountability for the educational outcomes of all students;
- increase the educational system's capacity for improving teaching and learning;
- support collaborative efforts by states to make joint decisions and adopt shared practices in the national interest;
- leverage the implementation of state and district activities that have been proven to be effective; and
- focus and leverage investments in necessary research, innovation, replication, and sharing of knowledge about promising practices and policies.



## THE KNOWLEDGE TO ACT

**As collective knowledge about the problems in the educational system has grown, so has an understanding of effective solutions.**

The education challenges facing the nation are significant. But armed with data, best practice, and research, educators and policymakers can take steps to address these challenges strategically and confidently.

### The challenges themselves are better understood

Adequately changing any negative situation requires finding and addressing the root of the problem. As recently as a decade ago, most of the information about the difficulties in the nation's secondary schools was anecdotal. This data, while alarming, was not enough to inform good and effective policy change. Thanks to the efforts of researchers and practitioners around the nation, however, the knowledge base about the challenges specific to middle and high schools—and to their students—is growing rapidly. Some of these challenges are described below.

- **Mismatched expectations:** A growing body of research is helping to build a consensus about the core skills and knowledge necessary for both college and workplace success.<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, state standards that describe what

students are expected to learn, and the corresponding assessments that measure mastery, are rarely based on a shared understanding of college and workplace readiness that is internationally benchmarked to global demands. This mismatch in expectations is exacerbated by the fact that state standards and assessments differ significantly from state to state.

- **Insufficient rigor in courses:** In the absence of standards and assessments that are aligned to the demands of college and the workplace, course-taking patterns can be useful indicators of student preparation. Researchers have identified a core set of courses that correlate to success in college and the workplace.<sup>55</sup> Encouraging students to take these gateway courses would seem to be a logical strategy for making sure that students are adequately prepared for the challenges and opportunities of life after high school. It is, however, not sufficient; course titles must be accompanied by high-quality instruction and rigorous content. Since 1990, the percentage of students completing a challenging curriculum has increased by 20 percent, gaps between subgroups' participation rates in these courses have been closing, and average grade point averages have increased steadily<sup>56</sup>—all of which are positive trends. But despite

The knowledge base about the challenges specific to middle and high schools—and to their students—is growing rapidly.

Researchers have identified a core set of courses that correlate to success in college and the workplace.

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“Graduation requirements have not kept pace with the changing world students will enter after high school.”

the fact that students are completing higher-level courses and getting good grades, scores on the only national test comparing student achievement over time and across states, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, have remained nearly stagnant over this same time period.<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately, there is no consistency among state standards and tests to help keep instruction and coursework aligned with course titles and curriculum; this means that even when students take courses with advanced titles, receive good grades, and have success on state assessments, it is possible they are still not getting the academic preparation they need.

• **Lack of access to a rigorous curriculum:** Too many students are still taking low-level courses: more than 30 percent of the graduating class of 2005 (31 percent of whites, 27 percent of blacks, and 46 percent of Hispanics) completed less than a standard curriculum, and less than 10 percent completed a rigorous curriculum.<sup>4</sup> This is due to a variety of factors. First, in schools that serve large numbers of poor and minority students, a rigorous college prep curriculum is frequently neither the default for all nor an option for many, as the classes are not available or are filled by a select group of “college track” students. (For example, recent analyses demonstrate that only 51 percent of African American students, 45 percent of Hispanic students, and 44 percent of the lowest-income students attend high schools that offer calculus.)<sup>58</sup> Also, where college prep coursework is available but not required, students who suffer from poor motivation and low expectations may have little incentive to take these classes on a voluntary basis. As Achieve, Inc., a nonprofit organization that works with states to

improve standards and assessments, notes, “graduation requirements have not kept pace with the changing world students will enter after high school.”<sup>59</sup> This inequitable access to rigorous coursework prematurely shuts the door to college on many students.

• **Misleading graduation rates:** Until recently, federal and state sources reported fairly steady high school completion rates as high as 86.5 percent and dropout rates as low as 5 percent.<sup>60</sup> In recent years, a number of respected researchers from a wide range of independent organizations—the Manhattan Institute for Public Policy, the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, the Urban Institute, Johns Hopkins University, and *Education Week’s* Research Center—have challenged the accuracy of the data and the appropriateness of the methodologies used to calculate these rates. These researchers use a variety of formulas and produce what is widely accepted as far more accurate—but also far more disturbing—numbers: a national average on-time graduation rate with a regular diploma of about 70 percent for all students, and near 50 percent for minorities.<sup>61</sup> These more realistic statistics have brought into focus the unacceptable outcomes produced by the current system and the importance of accurate data. There is increasing recognition of the important role that reliable graduation rates play as a critical indicator of school performance—for parents, policymakers, and other concerned community members—as a cornerstone of high school accountability and for use in decisionmaking about the targeting of resources and interventions to low-performing schools. The attention to this issue has led to a call from advocates, researchers, community members, and education leaders that graduation rates must be calculated using an accurate measure consistently across states.

<sup>4</sup> A standard curriculum is defined as at least four credits of English and three each in social studies, mathematics, and science. A rigorous curriculum is defined as four credits of English, four of mathematics (including precalculus or higher), three in science (including biology, chemistry, and physics), three in social studies, and three in a foreign language.

• **Academic predictors of dropping out:**

High school graduation statistics describe *who* is most likely to drop out of schools: poor, minority, and male students, as well as students who have nonacademic challenges such as mobility, homelessness, pregnancy, incarceration, or abuse. Yet the demand for data-driven solutions to the education crisis has led many researchers to search for the root of the problem: *Why* are these students dropping out? Fortunately, recent studies have identified the academic factors (such as low attendance, poor behavior, and course failure) that more accurately predict whether or not a student is likely to drop out than socioeconomic factors. Known as “early-warning data,” “risk factors,” or “on-track measures,” this data has been used to predict as many as 75 percent of future dropouts by the end of sixth or eighth grade and 80 percent of future dropouts by the end of ninth grade.<sup>62</sup>

• **The concentration of the dropout crisis:**

In addition to better understanding the academic causes of dropping out, researchers have, as noted earlier, identified approximately two thousand high schools—about 12 percent of U.S. public high schools—that produce nearly half of the nation’s dropouts. These “dropout factories” lose more than 40 percent of freshmen before they reach twelfth grade and produce almost two thirds of minority dropouts. By targeting the persistent failure of this relatively small number of high schools—that is, by transforming the nation’s dropout factories into successful institutes of learning—there is opportunity for fundamentally addressing a significant part of the problem.

There is increasing recognition of the important role that reliable graduation rates play as a critical indicator of school performance.



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## NCLB and High Schools: In Need of Improvement

As the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—has been implemented over the last six years, much has been learned about the strengths and the weaknesses in the law. The Alliance for Excellent Education describes some of these flaws, as they impact high schools, in its publication *NCLB & High Schools: In Need of Improvement*, including the following:

- Title I—NCLB’s signature program, allocating funding to states and districts to provide additional resources to educate disadvantaged students—is the primary federal instrument for supplementing education funding. However, due to weaknesses in the Title I formula and the authority of local officials to decide how to allocate the funding, only 8 percent of students benefiting from Title I funds are high school students.
- Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)—the federally required calculation used for measuring academic achievement, identifying low-performing schools, and requiring school improvement actions—is an ineffective tool at the high school level. AYP’s measure of student proficiency—performance on state tests—is based on inconsistent and inadequate standards and often measures basic skills, not students’ preparation for college and the workforce. Also, AYP does not include a consistent calculation of graduation rates, nor does it require schools to improve the graduation rates of student subgroups over time. In fact, because of the poor measurements of and weak accountability for graduation rates, one analysis found that 40 percent of dropout factories made AYP—therefore exempting some of the nation’s lowest-performing schools from the attention and support they need to improve. Additionally, the lack of balanced accountability for increasing test scores and graduation rates creates a perverse incentive to “push out” students who are having difficulty in reaching proficiency on assessments and will therefore have a negative impact on the school’s overall scores.
- NCLB mandates that schools in need of improvement take certain actions on a specific timeline when they don’t meet state-set annual progress goals. However, because high schools often don’t receive the Title I funds that trigger (and support) this requirement, the school improvement provisions lack teeth at the high school level. Also, the federally mandated, one-size-fits-all improvement actions—including school choice and tutoring—are not effective at the high school level for a variety of reasons. Choice is often limited because 75 percent of districts have only one high school<sup>63</sup> and many failing schools are concentrated in urban areas where the vast majority of schools are performing poorly; whatever the cause, only between 0.2 and 0.4 percent of high school students participate in school choice options.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, recent analysis found that fewer than 5 percent of eligible high school students participated in supplemental educational services (SES).<sup>65</sup> While afterschool tutoring by outside providers may help the very small percentage of students who participate, this strategy cannot effect change in schools where the majority of students need extra help. Furthermore, many older students have afterschool commitments, such as jobs, activities, or caring for siblings or children, making them unlikely to choose SES. Furthermore, NCLB’s rigid timeline does not reflect the pace or individualized nature of school improvement, does not require data-driven, research-based interventions, and does not cause the most intensive actions to be put in place soon enough in the lowest-performing schools.

### More is known about effective solutions

The baseball legend Yogi Berra once said, “If you don’t know where you are going, you will wind up somewhere else.” This statement is especially apt in the field of education.

Fortunately, educators, reformers, and advocates are coalescing around a vision for twenty-first-century high schools that is

replacing the outdated and failing reality of today. This vision may be articulated in different ways—the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, calls it “rigor, relevance, and relationships”; the Alliance for Excellent Education has defined it through a set of ideal school characteristics (see box on page 21)—but the goals are the same.

The current body of research and best practice demonstrates that this emerging vision is a realistic projection of an achievable goal of excellence for even the most disadvantaged students. Educators are beating the odds in schools with major challenges, successfully turning around low-performing high schools, and educating the most at-risk students to high standards and expectations.<sup>66</sup>

Consider these three examples:

- **Bronx Laboratory School, New York, New York:** Bronx Laboratory School is one of six small schools located in a building that once housed a large comprehensive high school characterized by severe violence and dismal graduation rates. Founded in 2004 through a partnership with the Institute for Student Achievement (ISA), a nonprofit public high school redesign partner, Bronx Lab implemented a comprehensive school redesign plan guided by ISA's Seven

Principles.<sup>c</sup> The key principle for the school—which has a high-minority (99 percent) and high-poverty (79 percent) population—is a rigorous college preparatory curriculum. Other principles include the employment of an extended-day, extended-year schedule and a forty-five-minute advisory period almost every day. In these advisories, freshmen are assigned to groups of twelve students led by a faculty member with whom they will meet for the following four years, building close bonds and sharing academic, social, and emotional support. ISA provides regular data and instructional support to the school through weekly onsite professional development and meetings with a designated instructional coach, focused on instructional planning and practices, such as curriculum mapping and student performance data analysis.

<sup>c</sup> ISA's Seven Principles include: a college preparatory instructional program; distributed counseling™; a dedicated team of teachers and counselors; continuous professional development; an extended school day and school year; parent involvement; and continuous organizational improvement.

Educators, reformers, and advocates are coalescing around a vision for twenty-first-century high schools that is replacing the outdated and failing reality.

### A Vision for the High School of the Twenty-first Century

The Alliance for Excellent Education envisions that all high schools are personal, motivational, aspirational, challenging, exciting places for students to learn and operate in a supportive system. Students who need additional support receive it. In these schools, all students graduate ready for success in college and the modern workplace at the forefront of the global society and prepared for a lifetime of continual learning.

These schools would be characterized by:

- rigorous and relevant curriculum focused on twenty-first-century knowledge and skills;
- personal attention and support for all students;
- equitable access to school programs, curricula, and resources, and equitable treatment of students;
- skillful instruction that enables success for all students;
- strong instructional leaders who support the development of high-quality learning;
- a safe and supportive learning environment that fosters student responsibility and citizenship;
- family and community involvement and engagement;
- a focus on continual improvement and student success; and
- adequate and equitable distribution of resources, including quality of staff and programs, technology, and so on.

Additionally, ISA holds one Summer Institute and three Winter Institutes dedicated to professional development for principals and teachers. Bronx Lab also partners with the local nonprofit organization FEGS's Health and Human Services to meet students' (and their families') nonacademic needs through referrals to FEGS's network of social welfare professionals and through extended-day programming. The school has raised average attendance to 90 percent. The impact of these efforts is clear from the academic performance of Bronx Lab's first graduating class: its first entering class four years ago contained 104 students; ninety-one students graduated in 2008 with a New York State high school diploma. Average credit accumulation for the Class of 2008 was sixty-six credits—twenty-two more than the minimum. Every graduate received at least one acceptance to a college, with an average of close to four acceptances per graduate, and the Class of 2008 as a whole earned \$2.5 million in scholarship monies.<sup>67</sup>

- **Ánimo Inglewood Charter High School, Inglewood, California:** Ánimo is a high-poverty (74 percent) charter school established by the Green Dot Public Schools charter management organization. The faculty takes pride in its mission to challenge students with an ambitious program of studies: 100 percent of Ánimo's course offerings are designed to fulfill state university admission requirements or Advanced Placement criteria. These high expectations are paired with a range of specific strategies, including a five-week summer program in basic math and English skills for incoming students and intervention classes for struggling students, and a cross-grade student "buddy" program. The school focuses on constantly improving instructional quality by employing data-driven professional development, weekly or monthly teacher-to-teacher classroom

observations, and shared expectations through the development of a curricular portfolio. The school's approach has paid off: between 2004 and 2007, the number of Ánimo students proficient in algebra jumped from 2 percent to nearly 40 percent, placing them on the path to college readiness. Ánimo has a four-year graduation rate of 99.1 percent.<sup>68</sup> Ninety-four percent of graduates have continued on to pursue two- and four-year postsecondary degrees.<sup>69</sup>

- **Westwood High School, Memphis, Tennessee:** Westwood serves a high-minority (100 percent African American) and high-poverty (77 percent) population. In 2004, the school was ranked in last place among Memphis high schools and faced state action for failure to achieve. In response, the school's leadership put in place a variety of academic and social supports, including a mentoring program for ninth graders, a tutoring program for students failing to meet standards, a Saturday program for students needing to raise failing grades, and a computer-based course recovery program. To assure that no student falls through the cracks, Westwood teachers meet regularly to share instructional strategies and plan collaboratively, as well as to participate in school leadership teams. In just four years, the school has been completely transformed. In 2008, Westwood's students passed the state achievement test at rates of nearly 89.9 percent in math and more than 95.4 percent in English.<sup>70</sup> This dramatic turnaround has earned the school recognition as a National Association of Secondary School Principals' Breakthrough School and a Memphis City School District Blue Ribbon School of the Year.<sup>71</sup>

What makes these schools successful? While there is no single answer, these schools and others like them do share common characteristics. Various researchers studying successful schools have described these characteristics in similar ways.

Research conducted by Stanford University's Linda Darling-Hammond<sup>f</sup> describes four elements that are critically important in highly effective urban schools:<sup>72</sup>

- personalization achieved through teams of teachers working with shared groups of students;
- well-qualified teachers supported by ongoing peer collaboration and professional development;
- a common core curriculum organized around performance-based assessment, which engages students with work that resembles what they will do outside of school and challenges them intellectually; and
- a variety of supports for struggling students in the context of an intellectually engaging and challenging curriculum.

Researchers from the Center for Education Research & Policy at MassINC described common practices among a set of higher-performing urban high schools in Massachusetts:<sup>73</sup>

- high standards and expectations;
- a culture of personalization;
- small learning communities;
- data-driven curricula; and
- community engagement.

The national research organization MDRC identified five cross-cutting

challenges in low-performing high schools:

- creating a personalized and orderly learning environment;
- assisting students who enter high school with poor academic skills;
- improving instructional content and practice;
- preparing students for the world beyond high school; and
- stimulating change in overstressed high schools.

In studying several comprehensive reform models that are, together, operating in a total of 2,500 high schools across the country, MDRC researchers concluded that successful high school reform requires the twin pillars of structural changes to improve personalization and improvements in instruction.<sup>74</sup>

In a study of high-impact high schools—schools that produced unusually large improvement in student performance among students who entered significantly below grade level—researchers from the Education Trust, a national research and advocacy organization, identified common practices that differentiated those schools from average- or low-impact schools:<sup>75</sup>

- teacher placement in these schools is based on student performance data instead of teacher preference and seniority;
- support for new teachers is structured and focused on curriculum and instruction, not teacher motivation;
- principals work aggressively and proactively to recruit their staff instead of relying on district procedures;
- student support programs are triggered by performance data, and participation

What makes these schools successful? While there is no single answer, these schools and others like them do share common characteristics.

<sup>f</sup> In addition to being one of the nation's foremost education experts, Linda Darling-Hammond is a member of the board of directors of the Alliance for Excellent Education.

There are many common elements in the high schools observed across these studies, including maintaining high expectations for students, using data and collaboration to solve problems and guide decisionmaking, and providing targeted support to the educators and students who need it.

- is not voluntary for identified students;
- early-warning systems are used to identify incoming ninth graders who are likely to struggle and assign them to a variety of supports;
- academic support services are provided in the context of grade-level courses, not remedial courses that delay the completion of the college prep curriculum;
- time for instructional purposes is maximized and protected;
- data analysis and use is formalized and championed by the principal;
- classes with struggling students are made smaller;
- teachers collaborate on course content to ensure consistency in teaching; and
- teachers use standards and assessments to monitor their teaching.

A recent study by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences identified the enabling conditions necessary for a successful, dramatic, and quick turnaround in the lowest-performing schools:<sup>76</sup>

- leadership that signals the need for dramatic change;
- a consistent focus on improving instruction using data;
- visible improvement early in the turnaround process; and
- the formation of a committed staff.

There are many common elements in the high schools observed across these studies, including maintaining high expectations for students, using data and collaboration to solve problems and guide decisionmaking, and providing targeted support to the educators and students who need it. These findings merely serve as a representative sample of the many efforts to study high schools and identify the core practices or characteristics embedded in success.

**With solid information about the secondary students and schools that need improvement, as well as evidence of success from schools and programs across the country, there is no excuse for inaction.**



## A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION TO IMPROVE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

**Effective practice must be supported with smart policies.**

The pockets of success described in the previous pages can only be translated into an efficient and effective system that promotes success in every middle and high school in the nation if policies are put into place that support or leverage good practice. These policies need to be coordinated at the local, state, and federal levels if a comprehensive national solution is to be achieved.

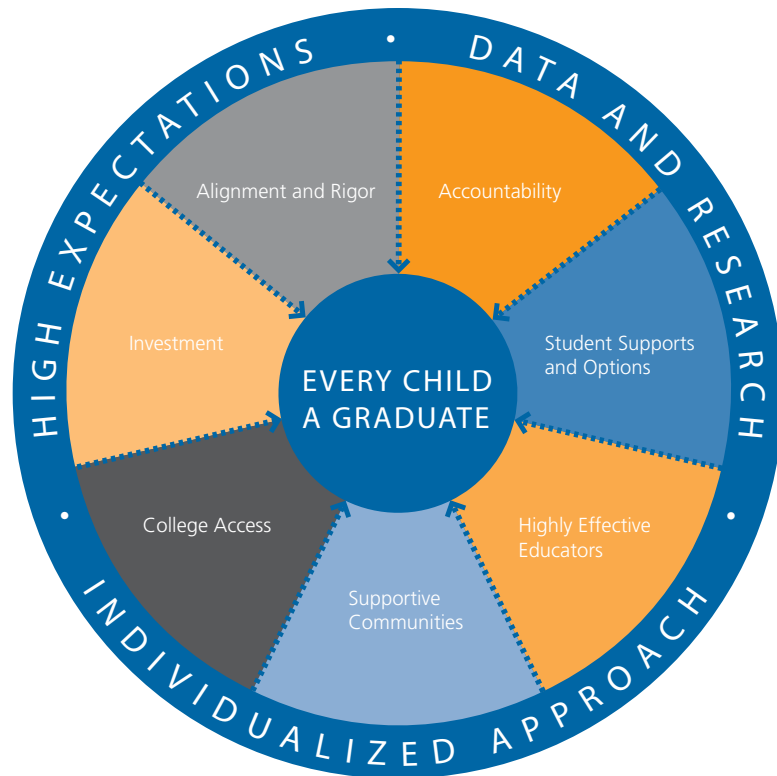
In response to the need to dramatically change the way secondary schools operate, educate their students, and meet the goal of making every child a graduate who is prepared for success after high school, the Alliance for Excellent Education has developed a Framework for Action to Improve Secondary Schools. This policy agenda reflects the growing consensus of researchers, practitioners, and advocates who are translating valuable lessons from research and practice into recommendations for policy.

The Alliance's framework is underscored by three guiding principles, upon which all aspects of high school reform, across the spectrum of practice and policy decisions, must be based:

- 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 so that both the path to the diploma and the efforts to turn around low-performing high schools are successful.
- Educators and policymakers must be provided the **data and research** necessary to make informed decisions to improve policy and practice.

The framework, shown graphically on page 26, consists of seven policy areas that, taken together, offer a comprehensive, systemic approach to secondary school reform. Although the appropriate level of federal involvement varies from one element to another, all are critically important to achieving national objectives.

This policy agenda reflects the growing consensus of researchers, practitioners, and advocates who are translating valuable lessons from research and practice into recommendations for policy.



1. **Alignment and Rigor:** Demand high, common expectations for every student by ensuring that standards, curriculum, assessments, and accountability systems are aligned with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college and the workplace and as a citizen.
2. **Accountability:** Support valid high school accountability systems designed to measure student and system performance; foster good practice and mitigate bad practice; and identify and direct resources and reforms to improve teaching, learning, and outcomes for all students.
3. **Student Supports and Options:** Ensure that every student has access to an engaging, rigorous, options-based course of study and the supports and interventions necessary to succeed.
4. **Highly Effective Educators:** Ensure that every classroom and school is led by an effective teacher and principal.
5. **Supportive Communities:** Leverage community-based services and opportunities to provide every student with the academic and nonacademic supports necessary for academic success.
6. **College Access:** Guarantee that every high school student has the academic, financial, and other tools necessary for access to and success in postsecondary education.
7. **Investment:** Drive financial and human resources to where they are needed most by ensuring that those resources are allocated equitably and adequately and used efficiently and effectively.

The following pages will explain these policy areas in more detail, describe the systemic solution necessary to address each, and clarify the role that the federal government should play in supporting them.

**Alignment and Rigor:** Demand high, common expectations for every student by ensuring that standards, curriculum, assessments, and accountability systems are aligned with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college and the workplace and as a citizen.

*Issue:* The best way to help America’s students meet the challenges of the twenty-first century is to ensure that they leave high school with the skills and knowledge necessary for college, work, and citizenship. It follows, then, that the elementary and secondary education continuum should be predicated on a common understanding of what those skills and knowledge are and designed as a comprehensive system to ensure that students can achieve them. Unfortunately, the current system misses that mark on multiple counts.

- The goals of the education system—who should graduate and with what skills and knowledge—are not matched to twenty-first-century demands. Many state standards are not aligned to college and work readiness and the needs of globalization, a situation exacerbated by the fact that each state has developed a distinct set of standards and assessments with wide-ranging definitions of proficiency that frequently do not match that goal. Without common, internationally benchmarked standards for college and work readiness, and absent accompanying assessments, there is no way to ensure that all students have the benefit of quality standards designed to prepare them to compete in the world.
- The components of the system—including standards, assessments, curriculum, accountability systems, graduation requirements, postsecondary education requirements, educator

preparation programs, and professional development policies—are not aligned; nor are they designed to ensure that every student, adult, and institution in the system is given the expectations, measures of successes, and support they need to reach those goals.

- The high school experience does not always ensure that all students are receiving the education that will help them meet the goals that have been set. Despite the growing consensus on the core set of skills and knowledge necessary for college and work success, there is ample evidence (noted throughout this report) that many of America’s students are leaving high school without it.

*Systemic solution:* Every student in the nation should be experiencing an engaging high school curriculum aligned to college and work standards. National leaders need to agree on what it means to graduate every student prepared for success in the twenty-first century so the focus can shift to educating students toward that goal. Creating a public education system that is aligned as described above will take significant effort and collaboration by multiple stakeholders.

The ambitious efforts of some states, either alone or in cooperation with other states or nonprofit organizations (such as through the American Diploma Project, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, ACT, the College Board, and the New England Common Assessment Program), to raise standards and/or improve assessments are moves in the right direction. Significant time, money, and political capital have been invested as part of these efforts. Nevertheless, many observers—including think tanks, teachers unions, research centers,

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advocacy organizations, and state education leaders—report that state standards and assessments are not aligned to college and workplace demands, and are inconsistent across states.<sup>77</sup> Individual efforts, while worthy, are simply too slow and expensive—as well as inadequate—to achieve the country’s high educational goals. The momentum built thus far by the states should be scaled nationally to save time and capital, and to build the political will that will be needed for common standards to be supported. A process to develop a core set of common standards that would be adopted by

states on a voluntary basis could prove a powerful driver in this endeavor. Working from a common set of expectations, the K–12 and postsecondary education systems could more efficiently align other components of the system (described on page 27) to these goals.

**Federal role:** It is possible to achieve high common standards in a variety of ways, but whichever path is taken to get there, well-designed federal policy can complement and influence these important alignment efforts by:

- Investing directly in state efforts to develop consensus on common

### A Call for Common Standards

The American economy is increasingly being forced to adjust to the outsourcing and mobility of jobs. Because of this, the system of standards that assumes that the reading and math skills needed to succeed in the modern workplace are different from state to state does not make sense. The true standard must be the one that prepares all students to compete for good jobs with their peers across the globe. Myriad proposals have been put forward by think tanks and commissions, and legislative options have been introduced in Congress, that are designed, in different ways, to move the nation toward a system of national standards. The Alliance believes it is time to support a well-designed effort that includes the active participation of the states to develop a common set of internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that define and measure the knowledge, skills, and attributes that students need to succeed. These common standards should be fewer, clearer, and higher than those currently used by most states. A set of common standards could be arrived at many ways—for example through a state-led process, a national commission, committees of subject-area experts, or some combination of these—but however they are achieved, the Alliance believes a successful effort would result in common standards that

- are developed through a transparent and inclusive process that includes the participation of states, national and international experts, and is validated by a wide spectrum of leaders;
- are adopted voluntarily by the states as a “high floor” of common expectations for student and system performance upon which each state could build if necessary;
- define expectations for students in grades K–12, working backward from the outcome of college and work readiness in the global economy, and internationally benchmarked against the most successful countries;
- build off the best existing available standards, including front-runner states and consortia of states such as the New England Common Assessment Program; the benchmarks of the American Diploma Project; the identified core twenty-first-century skills necessary for applying content knowledge; respected college- and work-readiness standards and assessments, such as those developed by ACT and the College Board; and professionally developed content standards, such as those developed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics;
- are accompanied by the development of high-quality voluntary assessments aligned to these standards, freeing up critical state and local resources to be used for other teaching and learning tools; and
- are continuously reviewed, expanded, and improved over time through an ongoing collaborative and transparent process.

standards for K–12 education, especially in reading and mathematics, and for a set of voluntary, high-quality assessments to be used for accountability purposes.

- Providing incentives for states to participate in these national and in-state alignment aims. These incentives could include financial support for aligned professional development, curriculum, or other tools to improve teaching to those standards, or increased flexibility in complying with other aspects of federal law. For states that adopt the common standards and assessments, for example, the federal government could provide grants for use in developing curricular tools or could extend the 2014 timeline for meeting the goal of 100 percent proficiency in reading and mathematics.
- Collecting and reporting information from high schools about progress and success. This could include required reporting of college-going, remediation, and success rates.
- Supporting more research and development activities in areas critical to ensuring that better standards translate into better teaching and learning, such as the development of performance-based assessments and the sharing of best practices.

Well-designed educational accountability systems can drive changes in behavior, policy, and resource allocation that lead to improved student achievement.

**Accountability:** Support valid high school accountability systems designed to measure student and system performance; foster good practice and mitigate bad practice; and identify and direct resources and reforms support to improve teaching, learning, and outcomes for all students.

*Issue:* In the context of standards-based reform, accountability is a core strategy designed to help improve student achievement and close achievement gaps. The general theory behind accountability is that it can influence improvement by setting explicit goals, measuring progress, making sure results are clear to everyone involved, and supporting change where results show it is needed. In education, this translates to providing useful data to students, educators, and policymakers and implementing strategies to address problems revealed by the data. Well-designed educational accountability systems can drive changes in behavior, policy, and resource allocation that lead to improved student achievement. For this strategy to be successful, accountability must exist appropriately throughout the education pipeline and affect stakeholders at every level of the system.

*Systemic solution:* Real educational accountability requires clear goals and performance expectations for students, educators, and institutions; indicators that accurately measure the performance of each against those goals; and a strategically designed, adequately funded and supported system that results in genuine improvement. Accountability can exist in many forms, from graduation requirements for students to AYP goals for high schools receiving federal funding to measures of teacher effectiveness.

Accountability systems must be aligned to each other so that, for example, teacher candidates are being prepared to teach what students are expected to know, or that high school graduation requirements match college entrance requirements. Meaningful accountability at the high school level requires

- shared expectations for what it means to graduate ready for college and work, with valid ways for students to meet those expectations;
- high goals for secondary school and district performance, and a sophisticated set of indicators to identify and prioritize among schools and districts not meeting those goals;
- a data-driven school improvement process that uses evidence-based interventions and best practices to address the individual challenges of each secondary school; and
- significant capacity, including sufficient resources at the state, district, school, and intermediary levels, to intervene appropriately.

*Federal role:* Unfortunately, federal high school accountability policy as it exists today as part of the No Child Left Behind Act is *not* a process designed for and tied to high school improvement.<sup>78</sup> Currently, states individually decide what their students should learn, how to determine if they have learned it, and how to report schools' progress in meeting their goals. Meanwhile, the federal government has set arbitrary deadlines for states to meet goals, devised a detailed formula to determine progress, and prescribed the educational strategies that should be used in the schools that do not meet goals. The result is a system of inconsistent goals, unreliable standards, and tests that vary across the

states—along with a school improvement timeline and process prescribed by the federal government. The existing federal-state role configuration should be reversed. The federal government should support education leaders’ efforts to work collaboratively to determine common expectations for student outcomes and assist in providing the impetus and infrastructure for high school improvement. The federal focus should be on monitoring outcomes and leveraging state and district implementation of systems of support, rather than on making decisions about individual school improvement actions. Meanwhile, states should be held responsible for meeting common achievement standards (that they voluntarily accepted) while using state-designed systems to diagnose underperforming schools and districts, and for tailoring school improvement actions accordingly. At the secondary school level, additional resources and support should be provided and directed to the high schools with greatest need.

**Student Supports and Options:**  
Ensure that every student has access to an engaging, rigorous, options-based course of study and the interventions necessary to succeed.

*Issue:* Raising expectations for students and the education system as a whole means that more must be done to help ensure that such expectations are met. Students enter high school with differing goals, interests, learning styles, and levels of preparation, as well as a range of academic and social strengths and weaknesses. Students also face academic and nonacademic challenges that can interfere with their success in high school. As described throughout this report, too many adolescents lack the academic skills—such as the ability to read and write at grade level—that are necessary for success in and after high school. If all students are to graduate from high school with an education that has prepared them for the high expectations of colleges and employers, schools must provide educators with the tools and strategies to meet students’ individual needs.

*Systemic solution:* Neither high schools nor their students benefit from a one-size-fits-all approach. High school students should have access to a variety of educational models, technology that supports different learning styles and needs, and interventions designed to help students who are struggling with specific skills or subjects.

”Multiple pathways”—differing educational models that are grounded in a rigorous course of study, engage students in learning, and prepare them for future success—allow students to choose among a variety of high school experiences to select the one that best fits their needs

and interests. These might include career and technical education schools, career academies within traditional high schools, or early college programs. Over-age and undercredited students and those with significant nonacademic challenges may need access to high-quality alternative settings, such as comprehensive alternative schools, programs targeted to populations with alternative learning styles or schedules, integrated-services schools (which provide child care, housing, mental health, or other services), or blended academic and career programs.<sup>79</sup> This does not mean that students should be separated into different academic tracks or held to different academic standards. Rather, the goal is to deliver a rigorous curriculum that can be adjusted to suit many different learning needs while still remaining firmly dedicated to helping every student graduate ready for college and the workplace.

Technological innovation offers options for schools to expand course offerings and provide interventions designed to help students master skills and content. Online courses have been steadily growing over the past decade; a recent estimate predicts that as many as half of all high school courses may be available online by 2019.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, new technologies and software applications allow schools to engage students in their studies and make content more interesting and relevant to them.

Schools must be able to identify the students who are struggling and intervene strategically to meet their individual needs. They must also be able to immediately identify risk factors that have the potential to negatively impact the performance of large percentages of students. Data and the

Schools must provide educators with the tools and strategies to meet students’ individual needs.



technological systems that allow it to be gathered and used effectively are critical to implementing both schoolwide strategies and appropriate interventions for struggling students. These strategies, which are already in place in some schools, districts, and reform models across the country, demonstrate that even students who begin high school behind their peers can meet academic standards and earn a diploma, when given an engaging course of study and well-designed, personalized, and well-implemented academic support programs.<sup>81</sup> But educators need increased capacity, tools, and strategies to deal with the academically and demographically diverse student populations they are serving.

**Federal role:** Federal policy should not mandate decisions about how to support and intervene with individual low-performing students; it should, however, provide incentives for data-driven decisionmaking at the state, district, and school levels. This should include investing in data systems that provide accurate information, professional development to prepare educators to address adolescent students' literacy needs, and research on effective strategies for supporting low-performing students.

The federal government has an important role to play in ensuring that all students have the option of attending a high-performing secondary school. This requires making sure there is a data-driven approach to improving lower-performing schools. Federal policy can do this by leveraging the implementation of data-driven state and district school improvement systems that are created according to the best available data, are clear to all system participants, and

allow for different strategies according to school need. Such systems will ensure that all students have good high school options by guiding a school improvement process that differentiates among those low-performing secondary schools that need targeted interventions, whole school reform, or replacement. These policies should be accompanied by a targeted new federal investment to be used by states and districts for implementing improvement strategies. There should also be a federal role in evaluating these secondary school efforts and sharing this research broadly to ensure that best practice spreads.

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### Addressing the Needs of Struggling Adolescent Readers

Millions of middle and high school students lack the literacy skills—including reading, writing, and critical thinking—they need to succeed in college, compete in the workforce, or even comprehend the written materials important to their daily lives. In the higher grades, it is generally presumed that students have the ability to read and write with the high levels of comprehension and fluency necessary for coursework without explicit literacy instruction. The theory is that extensive reading efforts directed at young children have created a sufficient foundation by fourth grade to carry students through the rest of their educational lives. Unfortunately, this is often not the case: roughly 70 percent of eighth-grade students read below grade level.<sup>82</sup> Research and data clearly show that establishing a strong literacy foundation early in students' education does not alone guarantee later education success. Students who lack adequate literacy skills when they enter ninth grade overwhelm high schools that are designed on the premise that their students are there to be taught advanced skills and content such as biology, literature, and geometry.

Partly because of the de facto national policy of ending specific reading instruction after third grade, secondary educators don't have the training, tools, and resources to properly address students' literacy needs. This adolescent literacy skills deficit—on the part of students, and many of their teachers—is exacerbated by the fact that as students enter high school, expectations and demands for student literacy increase dramatically. Not surprisingly, students who cannot comprehend their texts and classroom materials have significant problems as they attempt to master the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in their classes. As a result, many of them simply give up and drop out of school. In past decades, the nation's secondary school students might have been able to survive with basic literacy. But given that advanced literacy skills are fast becoming the prerequisite for succeeding in college, technical training programs, and entry-level jobs of all kinds, low adolescent literacy levels translate into a pressing national problem. While investing in early literacy programs and the literacy training of elementary school educators is a necessary first step, it must be supplemented with literacy support for adolescents and their educators. It is known that adolescent literacy is a significant challenge in low-performing secondary schools; as a result, addressing adolescent literacy deficits across the content areas must be a cornerstone of efforts to turn around these schools.

Fortunately, there is a consensus among researchers about the nature of the adolescent literacy crisis and about the kinds of investments that are most likely to improve student achievement. A meeting of experts convened by the Alliance for Excellent Education in 2004 to discuss this issue resulted in the publication of *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, which describes fifteen research-informed elements that should be considered in the development of effective adolescent literacy programs and provides other information about adolescent literacy achievement.<sup>83</sup> Recently, a U.S. Department of Education–commissioned review of research on secondary literacy instruction reiterated and expanded upon these findings, concluding that, in grades four through twelve, literacy instruction should address at least six key areas of concern: reading fluency; vocabulary knowledge; content knowledge; higher-level reasoning and thinking skills; reading comprehension strategies; and student motivation and engagement.

Historically, Congress has committed to improving early reading instruction, and has invested several billion dollars over the last few years in K–3 literacy programs. However, there has been only a small investment—mainly in the form of the Striving Readers pilot program, which was implemented in eight school districts—in the literacy skills of students in grades four through twelve. (For fiscal year 2008, Striving Readers was appropriated a relatively paltry \$35.4 million.) The lack of federal attention is reflected at the state level, as well; very few states have comprehensive literacy programs in the secondary grades.

Federal policy must address the adolescent literacy crisis through a concerted, comprehensive, and collaborative effort with states, districts, and schools that includes

- developing clear, comprehensive, and actionable state, district, and school plans for improving adolescent literacy instruction;
- embedding adolescent literacy strategies throughout schools' instructional practices and school improvement plans;
- development of diagnostic tools that schools can use to identify struggling readers in grades four through twelve, provide them with appropriate support, keep track of their progress, and adjust instruction to meet their needs;
- targeted interventions that will enable students who read far below grade level to make rapid progress in reading;
- ongoing professional development to help secondary school educators and leaders provide all students with effective literacy instruction;
- accountability systems that give teachers strong incentives to provide effective reading and writing instruction in the upper grades; and
- ongoing research on and evaluation of strategies to improve adolescent literacy.

**Highly Effective Educators:** Ensure that every classroom and school is led by an effective teacher and principal.

Teachers have the single greatest in-school impact on student achievement, followed by principals and other key instructional leaders.

Harder-to-teach students are more likely to be taught by novice, unqualified, or ineffective teachers.

*Issue:* At the heart of education is the interaction between students and educators. The importance of effective teachers and principals cannot be overstated: teachers have the single greatest in-school impact on student achievement, followed by principals and other key instructional leaders.<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately, there are a number of challenges related to recruiting, training, and retaining effective secondary school educators. Some of these concerns are present at all grade levels—high turnover, insufficient and ineffective professional development, few opportunities for career growth, and compensation systems that reward experience rather than effectiveness. But some challenges facing teachers and principals are particularly acute in secondary schools, including isolation from colleagues for collaboration on instruction, little time for professional development, lack of regular and informative achievement data, the assignment of teachers out of their field of expertise, and few opportunities to get to know students to personalize instruction and support.<sup>86</sup> Many secondary educators are ill-prepared to work with, or unlikely to receive professional development focused on, students with academically, racially, and culturally diverse backgrounds. They are particularly unlikely to receive professional development that helps them address the needs of English language learners (ELLs),<sup>87</sup> which is especially troubling since the ELL student population is growing most rapidly at the secondary level.<sup>88</sup> High schools are

meant to prepare students for college and work, yet few teacher preparation programs, practices, or professional development opportunities are designed to meet this goal. Another missing piece for secondary teachers is often the ability and opportunity to harness the power of technology, which is so present in the lives of their students outside the classroom.

These challenges are most visible in the lowest-performing and least-resourced schools, which often serve the students with the most significant challenges. These schools disproportionately employ novice teachers or those with fewer skills and inferior qualifications,<sup>89</sup> a problem exacerbated by high turnover. Some new teachers, overwhelmed by the challenges, leave the profession. Others, once their skills have improved, leave for positions in schools or districts with better working conditions and easier assignments. While some high-achieving teachers do want to teach in high-challenge districts, they often face frustrating barriers; a recent study by the New Teacher Project found that urban school districts lose as much as 60 percent of applicants because of slow hiring practices, delays in state budget timetables, and seniority policies.<sup>90</sup> In all schools, even ones with high percentages of highly effective teachers, harder-to-teach students are more likely to be taught by novice, unqualified, or ineffective teachers.<sup>91</sup> For example, the ninth grade is widely considered a critical and difficult year, particularly for students attending large urban schools. A recent study of teacher assignments in one such district found that “ninth graders, who are traditionally viewed by teachers as low-status clients, were ... disproportionately assigned to uncertified teachers and teachers who are new to the school

building.<sup>92</sup> As a result, low-achieving students, who need the most support, are often not served by highly effective teachers.

**Systemic solution:** To prepare all students for postsecondary education, two tasks must be performed at the same time: high schools must be restructured to align them to the high expectations of college and the modern workplace, and instruction must be revamped to make college readiness the goal, measure, and substance of good teaching. Research is clear that the key to preparing students for college is rigorous high school coursework; high schools and teachers must set college-ready expectations for students, teach rigorous content so that students can apply knowledge in new situations, and use teaching methods that engage students in learning to reason, write, and use information in complex ways. The conditions of high school teaching need to change as well, because teachers cannot solve all problems on their own. Teachers need the help of standards, assessments, curricula, preservice preparation, and professional development aligned to college readiness.

While there are pockets of excellent teaching and leadership across the nation, the goal of making every child a high school graduate prepared for the twenty-first century will only be met if every student is served by effective educators. This requires comprehensive action to address issues related to the educator workforce—during preparation, in recruitment, and throughout practice. Closing the distribution gap is not as simple as forcing good teachers into low-performing high schools. Teacher preparation programs, both traditional ones and those supporting alternative

pathways to certification, should provide secondary educators with key skills such as using data to guide instruction, employing culturally relevant teaching methods, and embedding adolescent literacy strategies in the content areas, and prepare them to teach in diverse roles and settings, including low-performing urban and rural schools. Additionally, recruitment and training of high-quality teacher candidates for high-need subjects and areas must be significantly increased.

Preparation, however, is not enough to ensure that all students have access to highly effective educators. The current challenges related to inequitable distribution of novice and low-quality teaching in low-performing, high-challenge schools must be addressed without taking high-quality educators from other schools. A dramatic increase in the overall quality of the educator workforce is needed, with the recognition that all educators, novice and veteran, need ongoing professional development and support to do their jobs well and improve their practice over time. Professional development provided through disconnected, one-day workshops is not acceptable; the culture and execution must markedly change. Professional development should be structured around student and teacher data that allows teachers to identify and build on strengths and weaknesses. It should be tied to standards, be ongoing, be embedded in their daily practice, and, when possible, be led by master educators. Where appropriate, it should also incorporate the use of technology to match student learning and interests. Specialized, comprehensive, and high-quality induction programs that provide support and assessment of novice teachers

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need to be provided in the early years of a teacher’s career. Midcareer and veteran teachers also need to engage in high-quality professional development and can improve their skills both as participants and as mentors or evaluators.

Good preservice training and professional development will not automatically lead to effective teaching. Policymakers, researchers, and educators must develop and strengthen teacher effectiveness measures that assess knowledge, skill, and classroom practice. As the conversation about good teaching has shifted from ensuring that teachers are “highly qualified” to ensuring that they are “highly effective,” there is a need for solid measures of teacher effectiveness that are embraced by the educator community and designed to strengthen classroom instruction. This culture of learning throughout a teacher’s career will advance the goal of providing a college- and work-ready education for all students.

School and district leaders also have a significant role to play in making sure every classroom is led by a well-equipped and effective educator. This entails providing teachers with supportive working conditions, including

- the ability to gather and use data effectively;
- the time necessary to collaborate with peers and tailor instruction to the needs of each student;
- ongoing professional development;
- the resources to train content area teachers in adolescent literacy strategies;
- access to community partners in order to address the social and health needs of students and their families;
- opportunities for career advancement; and

- rewards for effective teaching.<sup>93</sup>

**Federal role:** States and districts have the most influence over policies related to educators, but there are several areas in which federal law can support and encourage good practice at the state and local levels. Federal support can provide resources to teacher preparation programs to recruit and prepare better candidates for teaching, particularly for high-need populations and subjects. It can also require that these programs track, and be held accountable for the success of, their graduates. Federal policy should also leverage better distribution of high-quality teachers and not mask the inequitable status quo in which more-experienced teachers tend to cluster in schools with fewer low-income students.

Federal policies should also be designed to maximize the use of federal dollars for professional development. While the significant funding that is available for professional development is important, much of it is neither targeted to the needs of low-performing schools nor focused on the practices that are most likely to improve instruction. Funds should be targeted to the schools with the greatest teacher-quality needs as determined by specific indicators—such as measures of teacher effectiveness, teacher and principal turnover rates, teacher attendance rates, and measures of working conditions—and allocated solely for improving instruction. Further, professional development purchased with federal funds should be based on best practice. For example, professional development is more effective and better promotes college readiness when it is delivered at the school building and driven by clear goals, useful data, and teacher input. Federal policy should

also expand the federal investment in school leadership to offer grants to states, districts, institutions of higher education, and nonprofit organizations that have a track record of success in producing highly effective principals.

Perhaps most importantly, a critical role for the federal government is to invest in and encourage the development of aligned state and local data systems that track teacher and student information. Access to high-quality data is necessary for educators, educational leaders, researchers, and those who educate teachers, and is critical to providing the best instruction tailored to student needs.

All schools benefit from an engaged and supportive community.

**Supportive Communities:** Leverage community-based services and opportunities to provide every student with the academic and nonacademic supports necessary for academic success.

*Issue:* Many students struggle academically because of challenges that exist outside the classroom. For example, they may lack access to physical or mental health care, need social services to support their families, or have a substance abuse or relationship problem. Very often, the lowest-performing schools are in communities that are the most disadvantaged; in these schools, in particular, outside services and community involvement can enhance and support the conditions that increase the likelihood of students' educational success. But all schools benefit from an engaged and supportive community.

*Systemic solution:* Working together, schools and communities can streamline and align support services to ensure that all of the students' needs—both academic and nonacademic—are met. Communities can be involved in many ways, including embedding community services (such as counseling services and health clinics) in the school and involving parents in efforts to plan, track, and meet students' personal education goals. The expertise of community members can be used to enrich curricula and expand students' views of post-high school possibilities through internships, service learning opportunities, or jobs.<sup>94</sup> Community involvement can also translate into advocacy for the school, and help in providing support for and assistance with reform efforts.

*Federal role:* While most of the work to engage communities in secondary schools must be done locally, federal policy can support these efforts. Federal policy should encourage low-performing secondary schools to maximize community-based resources as part of school improvement planning. It can also encourage creativity in new approaches to involving communities by investing in innovative partnerships between schools, districts, and communities. Also, federal agencies and programs addressing the nonacademic needs of students should coordinate the implementation of grants and delivery of services at all levels.



**College Access:** Guarantee that every high school student has the academic, financial, and other tools necessary for access to and success in postsecondary education.

**Issue:** In today’s increasingly competitive and demanding society and economy, where almost 90 percent of the fastest-growing and highest-paying jobs require at least some postsecondary training,<sup>95</sup> all students need the option of pursuing postsecondary education or training.

As noted by Achieve, Inc., “While it is true that some students will go directly to the workforce after high school, new research suggests that the skills needed to get and keep good jobs—both white collar and blue collar—are very similar to what colleges demand of incoming freshmen.” This means that all students need to graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills to pursue the college or training path that is most appropriate for them. Most students understand this, and have high expectations that they will continue their education beyond high

school; in fact, more than 80 percent of tenth graders expect to attend college.<sup>96</sup> College access is an important motivator that can improve student success in high school and an important option for improving student’s future prospects. High schools are the epicenter of college preparation: there is evidence of strong correlations between a student’s high school academic performance (measured by GPA, achievement test scores, and the rigor of high school coursework) and his or her likelihood to graduate from college.<sup>97</sup>

Yet, despite increased understanding about the coursework and skill set that is necessary for, and predictive of, success in postsecondary education, high college remediation rates and low college graduation rates are evidence that many students leave high school without the academic preparation they need. For example, while college-going rates for minority students have increased over the last twenty years, college graduation rates for African American and Latino students have remained virtually unchanged.<sup>98</sup> For many students, a lack of academic

All students need to graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills to pursue the college or training path that is most appropriate for them.

### Defining College Readiness

David Conley, founder and director of the Center for Educational Policy Research at the University of Oregon, is an expert on the subject of developing and analyzing college-readiness standards. He has provided a comprehensive definition of college readiness to inform the design of strategies to increase students’ preparedness, which includes four facets:

- key cognitive strategies, including intellectual openness, inquisitiveness, analysis, reasoning, interpretation, precision, and problem solving;
- academic knowledge and skills, including writing, research, and specific aspects of English, math, science, social studies, world languages, and the arts;
- academic behaviors, consisting largely of self-monitoring and study skills; and
- contextual knowledge and skills, including a systemic understanding of the college culture, the human relations skills necessary to cope in this system, and the “college knowledge” to gain admission to and navigate within the system.

Source: D. T. Conley, *Toward a More Comprehensive Conception of College Readiness* (Eugene, OR: Educational Policy Improvement Center, 2005).

To ensure that students graduate from high school ready for college, there needs to be an improved understanding of what “college readiness” means.

preparedness is exacerbated by a lack of academic and financial guidance, information, and resources necessary to understand and plan for getting into and succeeding in college.

**Systemic solution:** To ensure that students graduate from high school ready for college, there needs to be an improved understanding of what “college readiness” means. (One such definition is described in the box on page 41.) If students are to have the academic preparation, financial tools, and information necessary to make informed decisions about their postgraduation plans, the K–12 and higher education systems must work together to push and pull students through the education pipeline. This includes aligning high school graduation requirements with college entrance requirements, ensuring all students succeed in a meaningful college- and work-ready curriculum, improving efforts to encourage and support low-income and low-performing youth in postsecondary pursuits, and reducing financial barriers and burdens.

**Federal role:** The federal government must help ensure that all students have sufficient academic preparation, an understanding of what is needed financially and academically to be accepted to college, and the financial support necessary to succeed in postsecondary education and in the workforce. Federal policies should provide incentives to states to coordinate and promote clear alignment between high school and college expectations and standards. For example, all students should have access to a college-preparatory curriculum, and students and their families must have the tools and information necessary to plan for

postgraduation success. Transparency between college and high school expectations is critical to achieving this goal. Federal policy should require states to report college enrollment, persistence, and graduation data for each high school. In addition, postsecondary institutions should be required to provide clear, accessible information about their requirements for admission and placement into credit-bearing courses. Federal efforts should include providing incentives for the development of personal graduation plans and increasing funding for programs like GEAR UP and TRIO that provide at-risk students with access to information about and support for college. Congress should help greater numbers of high-achieving immigrant students who have been in the United States since childhood and are likely to stay in the country to attain a college education by passing legislation to permit states to determine residency for higher education purposes. Finally, federal policy should help lower financial barriers that keep students from going to and completing college by increasing financial aid, making student loans more affordable, and supporting policies that lower college costs.

**Investment:** Drive financial and human resources to where they are needed most by ensuring that those resources are allocated equitably and adequately and used efficiently and effectively.

**Issue:** As recent analyses from the National Assessment of Educational Progress and ACT show, while there has been improvement in educational outcomes in the early grades, academic stagnation and decline are the respective trends in the middle and high school years. These and other findings support the fact that investment must be sustained throughout the educational continuum; otherwise, the impact and benefit of the early attention fades over time. The nation simply cannot make every child a high school graduate without investing in America's secondary schools through new funding and by better targeting existing resources. The necessary increases in investment must be used to drive genuine school reform. Simply making an already dysfunctional system more expensive is not an acceptable goal.

**Systemic solution:** The necessary education reforms described in the sections above need to be carefully planned and financially supported. Resources need to be allocated equitably and adequately to reach all students. More attention needs to be paid to ensuring

that resources are used efficiently and effectively to support evidence-based practices that improve student outcomes. Policies should drive investments (in resources including teachers, leaders, and rich curriculum, among others) to where they are needed most. As data confirms the need and best-practice and proven research inform the solutions, policies that guide investments that support strategic school improvement and student outcomes must improve the use of current resources *and* provide new, targeted funding.

**Federal role:** Most education funding is provided at the state and local levels through property taxes and state budget decisions. Federal funding, however, plays an important role in the overall education funding stream. It can drive changes that are not otherwise politically viable at the state or local levels and distribute funds to schools in poorer communities that lack adequate resources, including funding, effective educators, and high-quality facilities. Federal support can also be used to provide incentives to states and districts to encourage their participation in activities or to adopt practices in the national interest.

Currently, there is relatively little federal investment in the nation's secondary schools. Rather, federal education funding supports the bookends

Investment must be sustained throughout the educational continuum; otherwise, the impact and benefit of the early attention fades over time.

Simply making an already dysfunctional system more expensive is not an acceptable goal.

### Federal Investment in Research

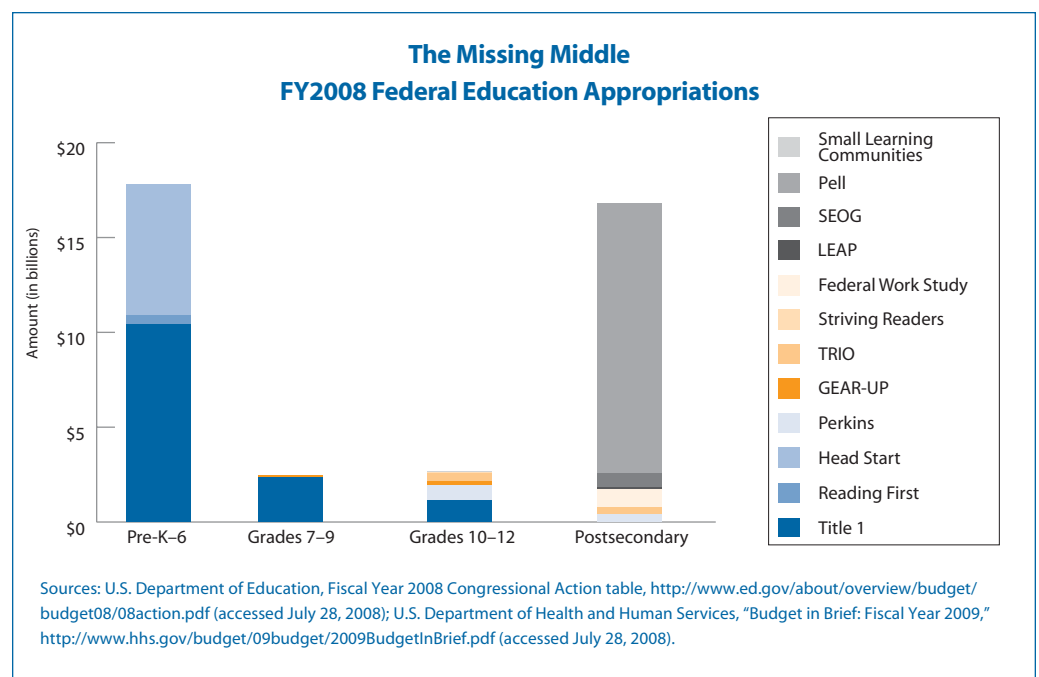
The United States needs to increase its knowledge base and create more tools for secondary school improvement. Yet funding for education research is dismal; the U.S. Department of Education uses only three cents on every dollar of its budget on research and development. Compared to other agencies, the Department of Education commits the lowest percentage of its discretionary budget to research. For example, the U.S. Departments of Defense, Energy, and Health and Human Services invest 17 percent, 37 percent, and 42 percent, respectively, of their budgets on research.

Source: National Education Knowledge Industry Association, "Testimony submitted by Jim Kohlmoos, President, National Education Knowledge Industry Association, to The Aspen Institute's Commission on No Child Left Behind," [http://www.nekia.org/files/Testimony\\_Aspen\\_NCLB\\_Commission2.pdf](http://www.nekia.org/files/Testimony_Aspen_NCLB_Commission2.pdf) (accessed August 9, 2008).

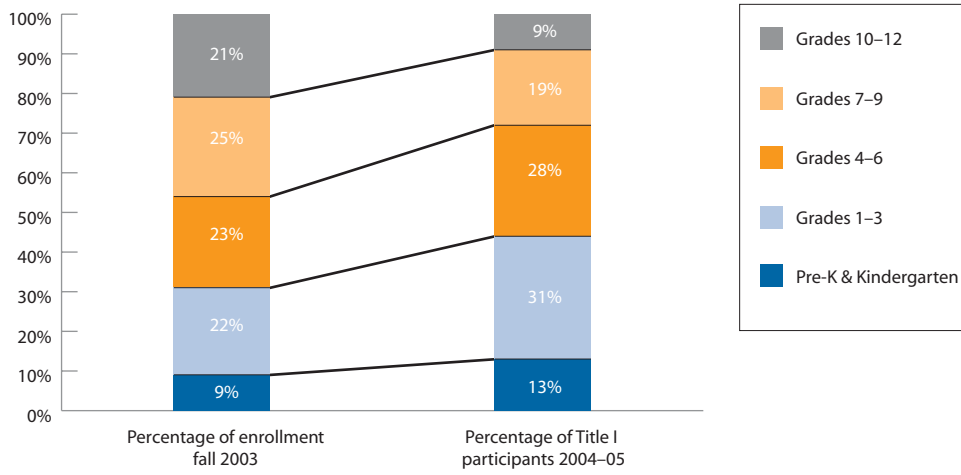
Any increase in federal education funding must be accompanied by thoughtful recommendations about the improved use of *current* funding as well.

of the education system—pre-K through grade six on one end and higher education on the other. Federal pre-K–6 funding totals nearly \$17.8 billion. Funding for postsecondary education totals nearly \$16.8 billion (not including the funds provided through student loans or tax incentives). Funding for grades seven through twelve, however, is only about \$5.1 billion. (See chart below.) Even Title I, the federal government’s signature program for supplementing education funding for disadvantaged students, barely reaches secondary school students (see chart opposite). As noted recently by Johns Hopkins researchers and school reformers Nettie Legters and Robert Balfanz, “The fact that most of th[e] high-poverty, high-minority high schools do not receive Title I funding, *the* federal program designed to offset the impact of poverty, is outrageous.”<sup>99</sup> This reality needs to be addressed, not by taking money away from early education or higher education, but by making new investments in the secondary grades.

The American public will endorse investments that are designed to produce real change and success, but they should not be expected to support funding for an unsatisfactory status quo. Particularly in a time of federal deficits and economic downturn, new education investments must be smart and focused. Any increase in federal education funding must be accompanied by thoughtful recommendations about the improved use of *current* funding as well, since federal investment has not yet been successful at turning around low-performing secondary schools, addressing adolescent literacy deficits, building and aligning data systems, and conducting necessary research and evaluation. All federal investments should be used to leverage systemic reforms and stimulate action driven by data and research.



### Secondary Students Are Disproportionately Underserved by Title I



Source: S. Stullich, E. Eisner, and J. McCrary, *National Assessment of Title I Final Report: Vol. 1, Implementation*. (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

## NEEDED: THE POLITICAL AND PUBLIC WILL TO ACT

**It is time to change the way the nation educates its secondary school students. What is needed to move from prescription to action is bold leadership, a national consensus and commitment, and political and public will.**

A new collaboration must build on the respective strengths of federal, state, and local authority.

Given the crisis affecting America's adolescent students and the consequences—not only for individuals, but for the nation at large—the public should demand a national response.

This response requires clarity and honesty. The graduation crisis in the nation's high schools must no longer be denied or minimized. The outdated premise of the current secondary school system must be confronted. Expectations for all students must be based on what the economy and society will demand of them after high school. Data must be used to identify the nature of the problems in the nation's classrooms, schools, and education system. And Americans can no longer refuse to learn from international comparison with and best practices of other nations. This will require a willingness to reexamine and consider changing some of the long-standing traditions and practices in the U.S. system.

The response must be smart. The lessons of best practice and research will need to be harnessed to design new schools, new policies, and new systems. Current uses of existing resources will need to be reevaluated and sometimes repurposed so that resources are targeted

to specific needs with evidence-based approaches. The shortcomings of current federal policy must be acknowledged, and a new collaboration must build on the respective strengths of federal, state, and local authority. Competing demands must be evaluated and the biggest problems targeted first.

And the response must be serious. Rhetoric must be followed with real action. Because the status quo is a powerful agent that needs a counterforce, a serious response also requires that individuals and institutions be held truly accountable for change. And policy changes must be followed by funding to effectively implement those changes on the ground.

The time is right for bold federal leadership in advancing this issue—leadership in proportion to the magnitude of the crisis and in line with the tradition of federal action to address areas of compelling national interest. The nation's leaders cannot wait to address the crisis in the nation's high schools in the hope of passing the responsibility onto others to solve: another generation of students cannot be abandoned.

As a policy and advocacy organization founded on the belief that there is a significant, necessary, and appropriate role for the federal government in helping to meet a national goal of ensuring that every child graduates from high school with a meaningful diploma, the Alliance for Excellent Education calls on members of Congress, the president, and the U.S. Department of Education to take responsible and immediate action to help ensure that America's students are prepared for the ever-increasing challenges of college, the global workforce, and a rapidly changing society.

Thousands of important decisions about educational *practice* are made daily in classrooms across the nation by concerned and dedicated educators. But ultimately, every important decision about education *policy* will be made not by a practitioner or a PhD but by an elected official. To help federal policymakers understand the importance of their role in addressing the nation's high school crisis, all Americans must demand a thoughtful and systemic national response that is well

conceived and designed. As educators and innovators across the nation continue their efforts to improve teaching, learning, and student outcomes, they should share their challenges and successes with their federal representatives. As researchers continue to study these efforts, they should strive for consensus and communicate their findings in ways that can be used to inform the policymaking process. Business leaders, community members, and philanthropists must continue to invest resources and time in improving America's high schools, and demand that federal policymakers learn from and extend the impact of those investments. The concerned public must prioritize education as an important issue and express that belief—not only to pollsters, but at the ballot box.

Every American has a stake in the success of the country's youth. "Every child a graduate" is an agenda for federal policymakers, but it is also a challenge for the twenty-first century that can no longer be ignored.

There is a significant, necessary, and appropriate role for the federal government in helping to meet a national goal of ensuring that every child graduates from high school with a meaningful diploma.

Ultimately, every important decision about education policy will be made not by a practitioner or a PhD but by an elected official.

***Learn more about the crisis in America's high schools, ways to improve America's secondary schools and outcomes for their students, and how federal policy change can better support systemic, comprehensive secondary school improvement, by visiting the Alliance for Excellent Education's website at [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org).***

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