



# Straight A's™

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **RAISING THE GRADE: Alliance President's New Book on High School Reform is Now Available**

The new book by **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**, was officially released May 2.

In the book, titled *Raising the Grade: How High School Reform Can Save Our Youth and Our Nation*, Wise describes the alarming cost of the high school crisis that sees more than one million students drop out every year—and millions more graduate unprepared for college and work—and informs citizens, educators, and policymakers about what they can do to ensure that all students receive a quality high school education that prepares them for a successful future.

To make the case for high school reform, *Raising the Grade* uses a combination of hard data, real-life examples, and lessons Wise learned during his twenty-four years as an elected public official. In addition, the book stresses both the moral and economic imperatives for investing in and supporting the nation's high schools.

“I wrote the book for educators, parents, citizens, and elected officials,” Wise said. “My goal is to explain the problem, discuss solutions, and provide the tools to take action.”

Regarding education decisions he made as a legislator, Wise said that his efforts had been focused on what he called the bookends of education: early childhood and higher education. “With the benefit of hindsight, however,” said Wise, “I have realized that my efforts—though well intentioned—were missing a crucial element .... I want to share the lessons I have learned in my public and political career to make sure that we don't repeat our past mistakes.”

Though *Raising the Grade* calls for the federal government to direct more resources toward secondary education, outlining the direct link between funding and achievement levels, Wise said that simply spending more money on the current system will not yield the desired outcomes.

“While an expanded federal role in high school reform is needed, I do not believe that merely increasing spending—or throwing more money at a dysfunctional system—is the answer,” he said. “Rather, targeting federal dollars to drive systemic and strategic reform—changing the way we do business, and then investing in what works—is the answer.”

For more information on *Raising the Grade* or to order the book, please visit [http://www.all4ed.org/publication\\_material/RaisingtheGrade](http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/RaisingtheGrade).



## **SPELLINGS ANNOUNCES NEW GRADUATION RATE REGULATIONS: Proposed Changes to Graduation Rates, Title I to be Discussed at Public Meetings**

On April 22, U.S. **Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings** proposed new regulations to strengthen and clarify the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) around improved accountability and transparency, uniform and disaggregated graduation rates, and improved parental notification for supplemental educational services and public school choice. In proposing these changes, Spellings pledged to continue working with Congress to renew NCLB but said that students, families, teachers, and schools need help now.

The new regulations would create a uniform definition of the graduation rate that is consistent with the definition agreed to by the National Governors Association (NGA) in its 2005 *Graduation Counts: A Compact on State High School Graduation Data*. Using this calculation, the number of students who graduate with a regular high school diploma in a given year within the standard number of years would be divided by the number of students who entered high school four years earlier, with adjustments for transfers in and out. A state that does not have a system to accurately track students who transfer could use the averaged freshman graduation rate on a transitional basis, but by 2012–13, all states would have to use the more rigorous NGA definition.

The new regulations would also make changes to the way that states use graduation rates to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Under current regulations, in order to “make AYP,” most states are allowed to require schools to make only a small amount of improvement from one year to the next or to meet very low graduation rate goals (e.g., 50 percent). “Permitting schools and districts with extremely low graduation rates or minimal levels of improvement to make AYP does not provide sufficient accountability for ensuring that students graduate on time,” Secretary Spellings’s proposal reads. Instead, states would be required to set a graduation rate goal that represents the rate they expect all high schools to meet and to define how much improvement schools and districts need to make to demonstrate continuous and substantial improvement from the prior year.

The proposed regulations would also require states to break down graduation rate data by student subgroups and include that information in AYP determinations. According to the department, simply requiring disaggregated data to be reported has not been enough to close large disparities in the graduation rates of different subgroups and ensure that rates improve for all students.

Under the proposal, disaggregated graduation rates at the school and district levels would have to be taken into account in AYP determinations by the 2012–13 school year. Prior to that time, states would have to disaggregate the data at the school, district, and state levels for reporting purposes, but only at the district and state levels for determining AYP.

Other proposed regulations focus on bringing about higher-quality assessments and stronger accountability for results, as well as providing parents with the information they need to make informed decisions about public school choice and supplemental educational services. Additionally, they would require states and districts to report the most recent available results

from the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading and mathematics assessments on the same public report card that they use to report the results of state tests. Such a practice would draw attention to states that have “lowered the bar” on their state standards in an effort to ensure that higher percentages of students receive a passing score.

According to the announcement, the purpose of these proposed regulations is to build on the advancements states have made in accountability and assessment systems under NCLB over the past six years, while incorporating key feedback from the field into a more clear vision of what it takes to educate each and every student.

In an April 29 announcement in the *Federal Register*, Spellings announced that a series of public meetings will be held to discuss the proposed regulations. The meetings will seek comments from the public on the proposed regulations; they will be held on May 14 in Boston, May 15 in Dunwoody, GA, May 19 in Kansas City, MO, and May 22 in Seattle. The department is accepting public comments on the regulations through June 23. Individuals who wish to present comments during one of the public meetings should register at [Special.Events@ed.gov](mailto:Special.Events@ed.gov) at least one week before the public meeting.

More information on meeting times and locations, as well as a summary of the proposed regulations, is available at <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/reg/proposal/index.html>.

To watch a video of **Alliance President Bob Wise**’s take on the proposed graduation rate regulations, go to [http://www.all4ed.org/press\\_room/WiseWords](http://www.all4ed.org/press_room/WiseWords).

To read the *Straight A*’s article on the signing of the NGA Compact, go to [http://www.all4ed.org/publication\\_material/straight\\_as/5/15](http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/straight_as/5/15).

### **Alliance President Speaks at White House Briefing on the Dropout Crisis**

On April 30, **Alliance President Bob Wise** participated in a briefing on “The Dropout Epidemic in the United States and Cross-Sector Solutions,” hosted by the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and the America’s Promise Alliance. At the briefing, Wise moderated a panel discussion in which he discussed the economic impact of the nation’s low graduation rate, explained that the federal government has a key role to play in high school reform, and called on Congress to address the nation’s high school dropout crisis. Other education leaders on his panel, who discussed the need to take immediate action to improve graduation rates, included **John Bridgeland, president and CEO of Civic Enterprises; Holly Kuzmich, deputy chief of staff, U.S. Department of Education; and Matthew Gandal, executive vice president of Achieve**. Keynote remarks were given by **Alma J. Powell, wife of General Colin L. Powell and chair of the America’s Promise Alliance**.

For a summary of the event and to learn more about America’s Promise, please visit <http://www.americaspromise.org/apapage.aspx?id=10602>.



### **DEMOCRACY AT RISK: Twenty-five Years After *A Nation at Risk*, New Report Says that United States is “Even More” At Risk**

*Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy in Education*, a new report from the Forum for Education and Democracy, argues that federal education policy over the last twenty-

*Democracy at Risk* (Continued from p. 3)

five years has been “inconsistent and shortsighted,” lacking a strategic approach for developing and investing in education that addresses the needs of a democratic society. It calls on the federal government to take on fundamental issues of equity and investment that only it can tackle.

“As practitioners, researchers, and policy analysts who have long been involved in developing successful schools, we are gravely concerned about the inability of the current federal role to support the breadth, depth, and quality of education our children need for a 21st century life—one in which they will need to solve problems we cannot yet fully envision, using knowledge and technologies that have not been invented,” write the conveners of the Forum for Education and Democracy in the report’s foreword. “Signs abound that the path we have taken in educational reform has led us astray.”

The report, which was issued to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the release of the landmark report, *A Nation at Risk*, notes that federal education policy has moved away from the commitment to equal educational opportunity found in the 1960s and early 1970s and from the focus on research, development, and innovation associated with the post-Sputnik years. The enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), it argues, has left the federal government even further removed from these previous goals, and left state and local governments to deal with equity issues while federal policy has encouraged innovation at the margins.

Noting that the “promise of NCLB,” is its “focus on achievement for all students” and its “insistence” that all students be taught by a “highly qualified” teacher, the report says that NCLB has emphasized basic testing skills at the expense of higher-order thinking and performance skills that are needed in the twenty-first-century job market such as applying knowledge to complex, novel problems, communicating and collaborating effectively, and finding, managing, and analyzing information. It argues that ignoring these skills has slowed student gains in math achievement, largely halted progress in reading, and pushed American students toward the bottom of international rankings in math and science.

But not all has been lost in the twenty-five years since *A Nation at Risk*’s release. The report notes that successful policies and innovations have been launched and that some schools have been redesigned or created that have produced large achievement gains for students. However, these achievements have not been systematically embraced and, as a result, are unevenly spread throughout the system.

In outlining a new federal role that would improve and transform schooling, the report calls on the federal government to become much more actively involved in gathering and sharing promising educational practices to help educators. Such a policy would take proven initiatives to scale and provide “intensive and highly focused research, development, and dissemination to document such achievements and create tools and professional learning to help them spread.”

To help reduce the gaps in educational attainment that exist between students today, the report says that the federal government should commit to paying off the “educational debt” that is owed to the nation’s most underserved children. “Just as questionable fiscal policies have saddled our

young people with an enormous monetary debt, our nation faces a huge educational debt resulting from hundreds of years of unequal educational and economic opportunity,” it reads.

It calls on the federal government to equalize federal funding across states and to insist on greater comparability in spending across schools and districts. It also criticizes the federal government for funding only 10 percent of most school budgets, an amount that it says “does not meet the needs of the under-resourced schools where many students currently struggle to learn.”

Because so many teachers, especially those in low-income schools, enter teaching without the knowledge and skills to teach students effectively, and do not receive the supports they need to stay in the profession and succeed in it, the report calls on the federal government to invest in a new “Marshall Plan” for educators. The proposed plan would underwrite the preparation of 40,000 teachers annually, seed one hundred top-quality urban education programs, ensure mentors for every new teacher hired, provide incentives to bring expert teachers into high-need schools, and improve professional learning opportunities for teachers and principals.

The report also recommends federal support that allows communities to provide all children with adequate learning supports in the form of preschool, health care, libraries, and parents who are literate. It envisions schools as centers that enhance learning opportunities for all community members and provide resources to allow parents and others to be engaged in students’ education.

These reforms would cost an estimated additional \$29 billion annually, an investment that the report notes is similar to “one month of U.S. involvement in Iraq” and “about 3 percent of the Bush administration’s tax cuts . . . . While it has become customary for us to believe that there is no room for additional funding for education, we are spending far more than these proposals would cost on the wasteful—and often tragic—outcomes of thoughtless policies that put our society at ever greater risk,” it reads.

More information on the report, including video from the report’s release event, is available at <http://www.forumforeducation.org/forumination/index.php?page=31&item=430>.



## **REFLECTIONS ON A NATION AT RISK: Issues that Resonate Twenty-five Years Later**

April 26 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the release of *A Nation at Risk*, issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The commission, appointed by **U.S. Secretary of Education T. H. Bell**, and its report have been credited with helping to shift the Reagan administration’s thinking about the wisdom of cutting education spending, which—along with abolishing the U.S. Department of Education—President Reagan was pushing for at the time of the report’s release.

*A Nation at Risk* sounded a strong alarm. It reads in part:

*If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we*

## Reflections on *A Nation at Risk* (Continued from p. 5)

*have allowed this to happen to ourselves.... We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.*

In last month's release event for *Democracy at Risk* (see above), **Milton Goldberg, the former staff director for the Commission on Excellence in Education**, said that the report was specifically written to get the public's attention. He noted that many Sunday newspapers printed the entire report. In addition to pointing out the problems in education, the report gained "blockbuster" status, he said, by proposing five commonplace recommendations: a required core curriculum for all students, higher standards and expectations for all students, improved teacher preparation, time adjustments in schools to make reforms possible, and holding educators and elected officials responsible for providing the leadership necessary to achieve these reforms.

Quoting from *A Nation at Risk*, Goldberg noted the strong emphasis placed by the commission on the importance of federal leadership. "The Federal Government has *the primary responsibility* to identify the national interest in education. It should also help fund and support efforts to protect and promote that interest. It must provide the national leadership to ensure that the Nation's public and private resources are marshaled to address the issues discussed in this report." He noted that many of the issues discussed in the report are still issues today.

Audio of Goldberg's remarks is available at [http://www.forumforeducation.org/upload\\_files/files/pvforum\\_educationdemocracy.mp3](http://www.forumforeducation.org/upload_files/files/pvforum_educationdemocracy.mp3).

Read *A Nation at Risk* at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html>.



### **WILL THE FUTURE U.S. ECONOMY *THRIVE* OR JUST SURVIVE?: New Report Calls on the Nation to Develop a Skilled Workforce to Keep Country Competitive**

To ensure that the United States will remain a dominant force in the global economy, the nation needs to develop an agenda to equip Americans with the skills necessary to be competitive, so says the Council on Competitiveness in its recent report *Thrive: The Skills Imperative*.

"A skilled workforce is at the heart of the country's economy and will determine our future growth," said **Senator Max Baucus (D-MT)**, who with **Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN)**, cosponsored the April 30 Congressional briefing on the report. "Strengthening our workers' skills is critical to creating good-paying jobs here at home and thriving in a global economy."

The report describes demographic trends that suggest that the United States' economic output will decrease unless changes are made. But it also details the critical skills and strategies that can and should be implemented to reverse the troubling trends and points out that a major reason for the strength of the U.S. economy over much of the twentieth century was the workforce's continual increase in educational attainment. "[I]n every successive generation, the workers entering the labor force were more educated than those they replaced," the report reads.

## Will the Future U.S. Economy *Thrive* or Just Survive? (Continued from p. 6)

But growth in this area has started to stagnate. Between 1980 and 2000, the number of workers with a more than a high school education increased 19 percent; however, growth of only 4 percent is expected between 2000 and 2020. The report speculates that this reduced growth will be due to “a mismatch between the demand for higher skills and the supply of skilled workers.”

Moreover, as a result of technological advances that allow business to be conducted and information to be distributed quickly almost anywhere on the globe, even high-skilled jobs are vulnerable to offshoring. As such, **Alan Blinder, an economist from Princeton University**, says that “the offshorability factor should play a role in determining what kinds of skills to cultivate for national competitive advantage.”

*Thrive* sees a solution in increasing training for middle-skilled jobs. More openings are expected to fall into this area—40 to 45 percent—than the low-skilled (22 percent) and high-skilled categories (about 33 percent). Middle-skilled occupations, such as technicians, sales representatives, and teachers, are also projected to grow at a higher rate than high-skilled jobs: 12.7 percent versus 7.8 percent. The report posits that as baby boomers retire, the jobs left unfilled will likely be ones “that do not offshore easily” and “that require postsecondary education and training, but not necessarily a bachelor’s degree.” Many of these jobs, says the report, pay about as well as those requiring a bachelor’s.

The report also calls for the United States to develop its service economy skills. *Thrive* says that three quarters of U.S. jobs are service-oriented; workers whose jobs fit this category include doctors, lawyers, office employees, and plumbers. “The time has passed to abandon the misguided stereotypes and focus on the skills for the knowledge-intensive service economy,” the report reads. “Industry, academia, and governments have begun to support multidisciplinary curricula, training programs, and research agendas around service science—but much more needs to be done.”

The nation must also continue to be active in research and development. In recent years, other countries have closed in on the United States; its share of the world’s scientists and engineers is expected to decrease from 40 percent in 1975 to 40 percent in 2010.

For more of the Council on Competitiveness’s suggestions for strengthening America’s workforce, download the report at <http://www.compete.org/images/uploads/File/PDF%20Files/Thrive.%20The%20Skills%20Imperative%20-%20FINAL%20PDF.PDF>.

***Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress*** is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both in Washington, DC and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America’s six million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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