

NATIONAL DATA ON ADLOLESCENT LITERACY

Data on National Adolescent Literacy Issues

According to information on the Alliance for Excellent Education's webpage, every year, approximately 1.2 million students, 7,000 every school day, do not graduate from high school on time.¹

- Only about 70 percent of high school students earn high school diplomas.
- 57.8 percent of Hispanic students graduate.
- 53.4 percent of African American graduate.
- 49.3 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students graduate.
- However, 80.2 percent of Asian Americans and 76.2 percent of white students graduate.

Low reading scores are a major predictor of high school failure. Low literacy skills affect grades in all areas, but especially in Math and English. Getting a high school diploma is especially difficult for students of color and students who are English language learners. The Alliance For Excellent Education indicates:

- 79 percent of all entering ninth-grade students read below grade level.
- Students in the bottom quartile of achievement are 20 times more likely to drop out of school than those in the top quartile.
- 2,000 high schools (about 13% of all U.S high schools) lose 40 percent or more of their students between their freshman and senior years.
- These "dropout factories" serve large numbers of minority and low-income students.
- Only about 50 percent of all student who do graduate from high school are academically prepared for the challenges of college and the workforce.
- 42 percent of community college freshmen and 20 percent of freshmen in four-year institutions must take at least one remedial course.
- The cost of providing remedial college courses is \$1.4 billion annually.

A report by the Education Trust indicated that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has resulted in progress in reading and math at the elementary level, but not at middle and high school levels. 2005 test scores indicated that at the middle and high school levels:²

- 20 of 28 states showed improvement in 2005.
- 24 states raised middle school math scores; 4 remained flat.
- 16 states raised middle school reading scores, and scores declined in 8 states.
- 14 states raised math scores at the high school level; 1 state had no change, and scores dropped in 6 states.
- 11 states raised reading scores at the high school level; scores did not change in 3 states; and dropped in 6 states.

In some states the achievement gaps narrowed, not because minority students were doing better, but because the scores of white students dropped. In both math and reading at the high school level, the gap between white and Latino students and between disadvantaged students and those whose families were more affluent, increased or stayed the same in most states.

¹Alliance for Excellent Education. *About the Crisis* .n.d.

²*Stalled in Secondary A Look at Student Achievement Since the No Child Left Behind Act*. The Education Trust, January 2005.

Cost of the National Drop Out Rates

According to the National High School Alliance Report, dropout rates have reached a crisis level. The lowest graduation rates are in depressed, rural areas, especially in the southern states.

- In these areas graduation rates are 57 percent lower than the national average.
- In high poverty urban schools, half of incoming high school freshman read two or three grade levels below their actual grade.
- 25 percent read below “basic levels” on standardized tests.
- Students who are learning English are of special concern at the high school level.

Data on the Alliance for Excellent Education Web site indicates that if 1.2 million high school dropouts from the Class of 2007 had earned their diplomas instead of dropping out, the U.S. economy would have seen an additional \$329 billion in wages over these students’ lifetimes. The country can expect to lose well over \$300 billion in potential earnings due to dropouts from the Class of 2008. If this annual pattern is allowed to continue, more than 12 million students will drop out of school during the next decade at a cost to the nation of more than \$3 trillion.

Teachers Are Leaving the Profession at High Rates

The Alliance for Excellent Education maintains that there is growing consensus among researchers and educators that the single most important factor in determining a student's performance is the quality of his or her teacher. Even low-performing students facing barriers to learning, can achieve high standards if they are taught by highly effective professional teachers; however, thousands of teachers leave the field every year, citing a lack of support and poor working conditions.

Beginning teachers are more likely than experienced teachers to be assigned to low-performing schools. They typically are given no professional support or feedback. As a result, 14 percent of new teachers leave by the end of their first year, 33 percent within three years, and 50 percent by the end of five years.

U.S. Students Lose Ground to Students in Other Countries

Nearly every international assessment shows that American students typically fall short of their counterparts in other countries. The Alliance for Excellent Education’s website states that thirty years ago the United States was the world leader in the quantity and quality of both high school and college graduates, but the U.S. has fallen to 18th of 23 industrialized countries. The United States has remained similarly stagnant in the attainment of higher education degrees. In reading, American fifteen-year-olds rank 15th of 29 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in reading literacy, and 24th of 29 countries in mathematics literacy.

Transforming High School Structures

Harvey and Houseman explain in a report they did for the National High School Alliance that the general-purpose high school model was created in the 20th century. It needs to change into a high-quality learning organization preparing workers for jobs in the 21st century. The current high school system evolved out of the design of James B. Conant, Harvard University, which was based on a factory model. Conant advocated for separate but unequal schools. He thought high schools should have at least 750 students and offer a variety of courses. He favored highly differentiated curriculum based on student interests and abilities.

Using Conant's philosophy, schools began "tracking" and "grouping" students, sending some to college prep classes and others to vocational course work. Typically classes were about 50 minutes long. Often students were assigned to tracks based on no more than someone's assumption about their interests and abilities. The result was a very unequal education.

Today, students in the U.S. step into a world when they leave high school that has little resemblance to the U.S. of Conant's time. There have been tremendous changes in communication. There is a world economy. High paying low-skilled jobs, manufacturing and factory work, and assembly line work no longer exist. Immigrants dominate the low-paying service industry jobs. The new 3 Rs are Rigor, Relevance and Relationships.

"General track" students are ill-prepared to succeed in either the workforce or secondary school. The high school education crisis is often defined in economic terms. Students are not adequately prepared for work in modern life. 70 percent of all new jobs require at least some college education. Workers with higher degrees on average earn more than people who don't have a college education, often 40 percent more annually.

According to Daria Hall's report for Education Trust, nationally one-third of all high school students don't graduate on time and rates are worse for students of color. The unemployment rate for high school drop outs is 30 percent higher than that of high school graduates. Dropouts are also much more likely to be incarcerated.³

Harvey and Houseman maintain that educators are re-thinking large schools or are trying to create smaller learning environments within larger schools. Expectations must be high and there needs to be encouragement within a respectful setting. Adult relationships are important to help motivate students and keep them engaged. Schools must be safe. The need for community mentoring is recognized.

According to the report by Harvey and Houseman, college prep classes in high school are needed to help ease the transition from high school to college. The traditional practice of offering college-prep curriculum to a small number of students has become a major issue. High-level math courses and literacy are becoming civil rights issues, because at least some secondary education is needed to assure economic stability and success.

College readiness (not needing remedial classes) is one measure of high school success. Asian and white students are disproportionately represented in the college-ready and college-attending populations. African American, Hispanic, and Native American students are all under represented.

According to the Wisconsin *State Superintendent's Adolescent Literacy Plan*, a 2006 ACT analysis of high school students' preparation for college-level reading revealed that only 51 percent of those taking the ACT reading assessment nationally demonstrated the ability to meet college reading demands. The study noted that there is a decline as students move through high school, resulting in more students being on track to handle college-level course work in 8th and 10th grades than there are students on track in 12th grade.⁴

³Hall, Daria. "Getting Honest about Grad Rates: How States Play the Numbers and Students Lose. The Education Trust, June 2005.

⁴Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. *State Superintendent's Adolescent Literacy Plan*. September 2008.

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