



Every Student Succeeds Act: A Progress Report on Elementary and Secondary Education

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Executive Summary

A core element of strengthening the middle class is building stronger schools. Over the past seven years, President Obama has invested more in our schools, provided flexibility from one-size-fits-all mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act, and supported school reforms across the country. Today, as President Obama signs the Every Student Succeeds Act, he is releasing a report that summarizes the progress the country's schools have made since 2008, including:

- Adopting higher academic standards in nearly every state, putting our schools on par with their international competitors and our children on track to graduate from high school ready for college and career.
- Reaching the highest high school graduation rate on record at 81 percent, with the highest gains among students of color.
- Investing billions of dollars in high-quality early education to help our youngest learners succeed.
- Reaching more than halfway to the President's goal of training 100,000 excellent STEM teachers, ahead of schedule.
- Expanding access to high speed Internet to 20 million more students.

The legislation that President Obama will sign today, which Congress passed with strong bipartisan support, will help our schools build on this progress. Specifically, it will:

- **Ensure states set high standards** so that children graduate high school ready for college and career.
- **Maintain accountability** by guaranteeing that when students fall behind, states target resources towards what works to help them and their schools improve, with a particular focus on the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, high schools with high dropout rates, and schools where subgroups of students are struggling.
- **Empower state and local decision-makers** to develop their own strong systems for school improvement based upon evidence, rather than imposing cookie-cutter federal solutions like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) did.
- **Preserve annual assessments and reduce the often onerous burden of unnecessary and ineffective testing** on students and teachers, making sure that standardized tests don't crowd out teaching and learning, without sacrificing clear, annual information parents and educators need to make sure our children are learning.
- **Provide more children access to high-quality preschool**, giving them the chance to get a strong start to their education.

- **Establish new resources** to test promising practices and replicate proven strategies that will drive opportunity and better outcomes for America’s students.

The Challenge

President Obama believes that every student deserves a world-class education. We have some of the best schools and best universities in the world – but too often our students are not prepared to compete in the global economy. Since the beginning of this Administration, the President has emphasized that we need a great teacher in every classroom and a great principal in every school. Further, this Administration has stressed that we must ensure that we are doing a better job helping all our students master critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, problem solving and creativity – skills that go beyond the basics for which schools were designed in the past.

America’s educators, students, and families have made historic progress in raising student outcomes across the nation in recent years, including reaching the highest high school graduation rate and lowest dropout rates in our history, and narrowing achievement and graduation rate gaps. States and school districts that have led the way with deep commitment to positive change – including Tennessee, Kentucky, the District of Columbia, and Denver – are seeing meaningful gains in student achievement.

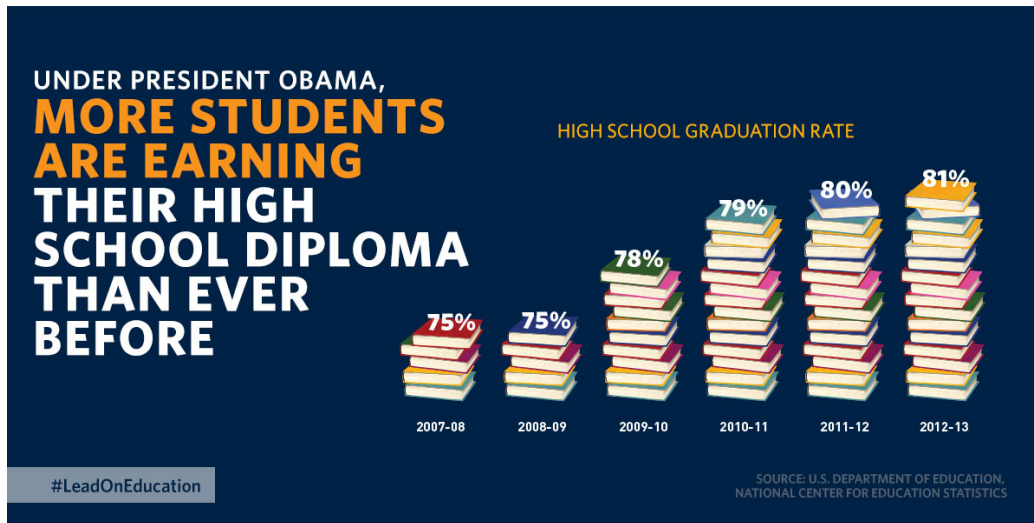
The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that President Obama signs today builds upon the significant success of the President’s education policies and represents an important step forward to improve our education system. It replaces the No Child Left Behind Act, which was too often a burden rather than a help to achieving these goals. As President Obama has said, “The goals of No Child Left Behind were the right goals: Making a promise to educate every child with an excellent teacher -- that’s the right thing to do, that’s the right goal. Higher standards are right. Accountability is right... But what hasn’t worked is denying teachers, schools, and states what they need to meet these goals. That’s why we need to fix No Child Left Behind.”

Progress Made since 2009

Over the last seven years, we have seen some of the most rapid, significant improvement of America’s education system in decades. And, more importantly, it’s put the building blocks in place for generational change. We’ve seen tremendous progress:

- Our **high school graduation rate** is the highest ever, at 81 percent,¹ and is on-track to rise again this year. Moreover, graduation rate gaps for minority, low-income, and disabled students are closing.

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), Averaged Freshmen Graduation Rates, http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/data_tables.asp and Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates, http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/data_tables.asp and http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_2010-11_to_2012-13.asp.



- For the last two years, our **high school dropout rate** has been at a historic low, following steady decreases. The greatest progress has been among minorities.² The **dropout rate among Hispanics** is half of what it was in 2000. **Rates for black and low-income youth** have been cut by more than a third. According to outside experts, the number of “dropout factories” has been cut nearly in half since 2008.
- The number of students who do not complete high school on-time has dropped by a quarter in just four years – from about 1 million students in 2008 to 740,000 students in 2012.³
- **College enrollment for black and Hispanic students** is up by more than a million students since 2008.⁴

Administration Action to Improve Education

Under the Obama Administration, we’ve seen tremendous efforts to improve education from cradle to career, with substantial progress made.

- **Quality Preschool:** The Obama Administration has invested billions of dollars to help provide high-quality early education opportunities so that more children are successful when they enter kindergarten, and more than 30 states have boosted their own investments in early learning.
- **Higher Standards:** Today, nearly all students have access to higher standards than they did a few years ago. 48 states and the District of Columbia have taken action to hold all

² U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Condition of Education, Status Dropout Rates. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coi.asp

³ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD) <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/AFGR0812.asp> and *Progress Is No Accident: Why ESEA Can’t Backtrack on High School Graduation Rates*. <http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/NoAccident.pdf>.

⁴ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_306.10.asp

students to challenging academic standards that will prepare them to graduate from high school prepared for success in college and the workforce.

- **Fewer, Better Assessments:** The Obama Administration has supported states in their hard work to move America past the traditional multiple choice test and toward assessments aligned to college- and career-ready standards and focused on critical thinking, problem solving, and writing. At the same time, the Administration is helping states and school districts to push back on unnecessary or low-quality tests and test preparation.
- **Strong Teachers in Every Classroom:** Every student needs and deserves a strong teacher, but minority and low-income students are less likely to have effective teachers than their peers. The Department of Education has launched a number of efforts to support great teachers and teaching, including proposed regulations that will strengthen teacher preparation, and the Teach to Lead initiative, created jointly with the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, to help teachers to take control of their profession and their career paths. In addition, the Teacher Incentive Fund, Supporting Effective Educator Development Grant program, and updated teacher equity plans Excellent Educators for All are initiatives that support states and districts to train, attract, and keep effective educators in high-need schools.
- **Competitive Programs to Improve Schools:** President Obama's Race to the Top initiative offered strong incentives to states willing to enact systemic reforms that would improve teaching and learning in America's schools. Race to the Top was the most significant reform of public education in a generation. With an initial investment of \$4 billion – less than 1 percent of annual K-12 education funding – Race to the Top catalyzed meaningful change for more than 10 million students and 700,000 teachers across over a dozen grantees, and for many more in states that did not receive funds. Race to the Top helped states increase their capacity to implement innovative solutions to improve educational outcomes by establishing high standards; supporting great teachers and leaders; using data and technology to improve instruction; and turning around the lowest performing schools – solutions that have since spread nationwide. Even in states that did not win awards, the work to develop an application and establish the conditions for positive change unleashed incredible initiative and creativity at the local level.
- **Investing in Innovation:** The Administration's Investing in Innovation (i3) program has helped develop a culture of evidence-based decision-making in public schools by expanding interventions that accelerate student achievement and that prepare every student to succeed in college and in their careers. The more rigorous the evidence an organization has supporting its intervention, the larger the grant award it can potentially receive. Originally, the \$650 million i3 fund offered support to districts, nonprofit organizations, and institutions of higher education to research, replicate, and scale-up promising practices that improve educational outcomes. The Department awarded 49 grants in the competition, but nearly 1,700 applicants applied – by far the largest number of applicants in a single competition in the Department's history. Now, nearly 150 i3 grantees are working in every state in the country, impacting over 2 million students.

- **Creating Promise Neighborhoods:** Since 2010, the Administration’s Promise Neighborhoods program has sought to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty by investing \$270 million in more than 50 of our nation’s most distressed communities, representing over 700 schools. These efforts are helping to build a pipeline from early learning to high school and beyond for our highest-need students by creating comprehensive, wrap-around educational support services and strong, vibrant school environments. Moreover, 1,000 national, state, and community organizations have signed-on to support and partner with Promise Neighborhoods to ensure these initiatives are effective and long-lasting.
- **More than Halfway to Reaching the President’s Goal to Prepare 100,000 Excellent STEM Teachers:** In his 2011 State of the Union address, the President called for a new effort to prepare 100,000 STEM teachers over the next decade with strong teaching skills and deep content knowledge. Answering the President’s call to action, more than 230 organizations formed a coalition called *100Kin10*. These organizations have made more than 350 measurable commitments to increase the supply of excellent STEM teachers, including recruiting and preparing more than 43,000 teachers in the first five years of the initiative. In addition, in 2014 the Department of Education announced more than \$175 million over five years in STEM-focused grants under the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant program, which will support more than 11,000 new STEM teachers in high-need schools. In total, the President’s *Educate to Innovate* campaign has resulted in over \$1 billion in direct and in-kind support for STEM education.
- **Expanding Access to the Technology Students Need to Succeed and Cutting the Digital Divide in Half:** Since President Obama launched his ConnectED initiative in 2013, we have cut the connectivity divide in schools in half. Now, 20 million more students have access to high-speed Internet, which they need in order to utilize modern digital learning tools. Today, 77 percent of school districts meet minimum standards for high-speed broadband, compared to 30 percent in 2013. More than 3 million students from all 50 states are also benefitting from the \$2.25 billion in independent private sector commitments of hardware, digital content, software, wireless service, and teacher training commitments. And thousands of district leaders have received training to support their commitment to making their schools “Future Ready.”
- **Making College More Affordable:** Our historic investments in student aid for college, a far simpler Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and the new [College Scorecard](#) are helping to give all students the opportunity to go to college by providing them with the right tools for success.

The Potential for Progress and a Record of Success

While we have much work to do, we know it is possible for even the most challenged schools to change course and dramatically improve student achievement. Educators, local and state leaders, and other stakeholders are joining together to achieve success with results-driven, commonsense reforms to help ensure that every child in this country has the opportunity for a high-quality

education. Recognizing this work, the Obama Administration offered states flexibility from the most onerous provisions of NCLB in order to enable and accelerate these reforms. Through these efforts, states, and local communities are:

- Raising standards for teaching and learning to align with real expectations for success in college and careers.
- Focusing on improving student outcomes, especially for those students who are furthest behind, by rejecting labels of failure based on a single snapshot and instead identifying schools that are showing improvement and closing achievement gaps, recognizing progress and growth over time, and responding accordingly.
- Supporting dramatic change to accelerate student achievement, close gaps, and turnaround persistently low-performing schools that aren't providing students with the education they need to succeed in college and a career.
- Creating comprehensive systems to support great teaching and school leadership that integrate pre-service preparation, recruitment, induction, multi-measure evaluation systems, personalized development and feedback, and career advancement for all educators.
- Identifying innovative approaches to teaching and learning, based on evidence of what works and what can work better for their schools.

In states and school districts across the country, we are seeing remarkable progress. For example:

- **Closing Achievement Gaps in New Mexico:** New Mexico has used flexibility from NCLB mandates to move from a pass/fail accountability system to a letter grade system that provides educators and parents with clear information about their schools' performance, identifies students that are struggling, and targets greater supports toward those students. These reforms continue to emphasize accountability for student performance, including an enhanced focus on subgroup performance, while also encouraging schools to promote student success on indicators of college and career readiness. Last year the state saw an 8 percent increase in the number of AP exams taken, and a 5 percent increase in students scoring a 3 or better. Additionally, between 2009 and 2015, the achievement gaps between white and Hispanic students in New Mexico on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math assessments in grades 4 and 8 decreased by more than 5 points.
- **Tennessee Achievement Rising for Students:** Tennessee's "First to the Top" legislation created conditions for significant improvement in the state's public schools, setting clear educational priorities that helped it become one of the fastest improving states in the nation on the NAEP. These reforms were incentivized and supported by Tennessee's \$500 million Race to the Top grant, awarded in 2010. With the opportunity to invest in meaningful changes for kids, Tennessee raised expectations with higher standards and rigorous assessments, enhanced data systems to improve instruction, supported teachers and leaders with strategies to increase teacher effectiveness, and created a cutting-edge local turnaround effort in the Achievement School District. For example, Tennessee fourth graders scored at least four points higher in both subjects between the 2011 and 2015 NAEP, propelling the state from below average scores to a level of performance on

par with national results. Results from the 2015 NAEP also showed progress among nearly all student demographic groups compared to 2009 data.

- **Higher Performance in Washington, DC:** Bolstered by \$75 million in Race to the Top funds, DC Public Schools, the Office of the State Superintendent for Education for the District, and 29 public charter school organizations came together to support the implementation of college- and career-ready standards, build a stronger pipeline for effective teachers and leaders, and create conditions to support and attract those educators to DC's persistently low-achieving schools. Results from the 2015 NAEP for DC showed significant progress since 2011 in reading and math in both 4th and 8th grades. In fact, DC Public Schools made the most substantial progress of all 21 districts that participated in the urban district NAEP. When viewed over a longer period of time, DC's progress is even more pronounced. Since 2003, fourth grade scores have increased by 27 points on the NAEP math assessment, and eighth grade performance has increased by 15 points.
- **Ten Years of Growth in Denver:** Over the last decade, Denver Public Schools has increased its on-time graduation rate for black and Hispanic students by 60 percent, increased college enrollment by 25 percent. Denver accomplished these feats by raising expectations for students, overhauling its system for supporting educators, creating robust public school choice options for all families through a portfolio of traditional, charter, and innovation schools, introducing a student-based budget that leveled the funding playing field between schools, adopting a multi-measure school performance system, and investing in extensive community engagement and school climate initiatives.

Building on Administration Action: Where the Every Student Succeeds Act Fits In

Under NCLB, schools were given many ways to fail, but very few opportunities to succeed, by forcing schools and districts into one-size-fits-all solutions, regardless of the individual needs and circumstances in those communities. The Obama Administration acted to fix that, and ESSA cements that progress.

- **Taking Action When Congress Did Not:** In 2011, President Obama announced the first comprehensive plan to NCLB through executive action -- a voluntary waiver program that enabled states to gain flexibility from the law's specific mandates in exchange for state-designed plans to set high standards; re-shape accountability systems; and support the evaluation and development of effective teachers and principals. These actions built on the comprehensive blueprint for reform the Administration laid out in 2010. President Obama noted that the problems with NCLB "have been obvious to parents and educators all over this country for years. But despite the good intentions of some, Congress has failed to fix them."

- Federal-State Partnership:** In 2012, joined by Governor Bill Haslam (R-TN), President Obama welcomed leaders from ten states to the White House to announce the first round of waivers approved under his Administration’s executive action to offer Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) flexibility. To date, over forty states have met this challenge and developed state-driven solutions through ESEA flexibility that expect college- and career-readiness for every student, use multiple measures to differentiate schools for rewards and supports, focus resources on comprehensive, rigorous interventions in the lowest-performing schools, and ensure that all low-achieving students have the supports they need to catch up to their peers. Since being approved for ESEA flexibility, these states have implemented critical reforms leading to fewer low-performing schools; a narrowing graduation gap among minority and white students; and increased focus on meaningful professional development for teachers, principals and superintendents.
- Cementing Progress:** ESSA builds on the state leadership and innovation unleashed through implementation of ESEA flexibility by continuing to allow states to define goals, set multiple indicators for measuring school success, determine how to differentiate schools and recognize progress for all students and subgroups, and design and implement interventions where students are struggling – especially in the bottom 5 percent of schools, schools where subgroups are under-performing, and high schools with high dropout rates. ESSA cements the progress made under the Obama Administration ESEA waivers program.

Not only does ESSA cement progress already made, it embraces much of the vision the Administration has outlined for education policy since 2009:

- College- and Career-Ready Standards for America’s Learners:** The bill affirms the path taken by 48 states and the District of Columbia to hold all students to challenging academic content standards that will prepare them to graduate from

SINCE ENTERING OFFICE, PRESIDENT OBAMA HAS CALLED FOR A BIPARTISAN DEAL TO FIX NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND:



Jan. 19, 2010: President Obama visits Graham Road Elementary School in Falls Church, VA to highlight the need for high standards, rigorous accountability and reform in America’s schools.



March 13, 2010: Secretary Duncan issues the Obama Administration’s *Blueprint for Reform*, to fix No Child Left Behind and re-focus America’s schools on the goal of preparing all students for college and careers.



March 14, 2011: President Obama visits Kenmore Middle School in Arlington, VA and urges Congress to act before the next school year to replace NCLB and its one-size-fits all mandates with a law that works better for students, parents and teachers.



Sept. 23, 2011: President Obama announces the first comprehensive plan to fix NCLB through executive action, a waiver program that enables states to gain flexibility in exchange for plans that set high standards, improve accountability, and support the evaluation and development of teachers and principals.



Feb. 9, 2012: Joined by Governor Bill Haslam (R-TN), President Obama welcomes leaders from ten states to the White House to announce the first round of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) waivers approved under his Administration’s executive action.



March 2015: President Obama visits separately with leaders of the nation’s largest school districts and with 44 of the nation’s Chief State School Officers, to discuss shared priorities in the reauthorization of ESEA, including advancing equity and accountability and improving opportunities and outcomes for students.



July 2015: Both the U.S. House and Senate pass comprehensive bills to replace NCLB. This is the first time since 2001 that both chambers have passed a reauthorization of ESEA.



Oct. 25, 2015: President Obama meets with state and districts leaders in the Oval Office and issues an open letter, calling for limits to standardized testing in school.



Nov. 19, 2015: The U.S. House of Representatives and Senate Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Conference Committee votes 38-1 in favor of advancing a bipartisan agreement, which includes key Administration priorities.



Dec. 2015: The Obama Administration calls on Congress to swiftly enact the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act to revise and replace No Child Left Behind.

high school prepared for success in college and the workforce. In 2008, America's governors and state education officials came together to develop a new set of college- and career-ready standards for their schools. The Obama Administration supported those efforts through its Race to the Top grant program and the federal-state partnership established in its ESEA flexibility agreements.

- **Rigorous Accountability for All Students:** Consistent with the Administration's legislative proposals, the bill builds on the federal-state ESEA flexibility agreements in place in over 40 states to require meaningful goals for the progress of all students, and to ensure that every student subgroup makes gains toward college and career-readiness. States must set ambitious targets to close student achievement and graduation rate gaps among subgroups of students in order to meet their goals. In schools where too many students consistently fail to reach the goals and other indicators set by the state, school districts will ensure they receive tailored interventions and supports proportionate to the needs of those schools and the students they serve.
- **Reform and Resources for America's Struggling Schools and Students:** The bill will target resources, attention, and effort to make gains for our students attending schools most in need of help. Consistent with the policies in place under the Administration's ESEA flexibility agreements, the bill moves away from NCLB's one-size-fits-all accountability system and ensures that states, at a minimum, undertake reforms in their lowest performing schools, in high schools with high dropout rates, and in schools where subgroups are falling behind. It includes provisions that would require districts to use evidence-based models to support whole-school interventions in the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools and schools where more than a third of high school students do not graduate on time, and includes dedicated funding to support interventions in these schools. In schools where subgroups of students persistently underperform, school districts must mount targeted interventions and supports to narrow gaps and improve student achievement. If such schools are not showing improvement, the state is designated the responsibility of ensuring more rigorous strategies are put in place. Moreover, the Department of Education has the authority it needs to ensure that states carry out their responsibilities.
- **New Incentives to Improve Opportunities and Outcomes for Students:** The bill includes initiatives modeled after the Administration's programs to:
 - Establish or expand access to high-quality, state-funded preschool for children from low- and moderate-income families, building from the Administration's Preschool Development Grants program.
 - Develop, refine, and replicate innovative and ambitious reforms to close the achievement gap in America's schools, similar to the Administration's existing i3 program.
 - Expand incentives to prepare, develop, and advance effective teachers and principals in America's schools.
 - Expands flexibility for districts to offer all of their students a well-rounded education, narrow the course equity gap, especially in STEM subjects, and invest in learning technologies and open educational resources.

- Leverage resources to address the significant challenges faced by students and families living in high-poverty communities through the Promise Neighborhoods effort, supporting a continuum of services from early learning through college.
 - Expand support for high-performing public charter schools for high-need students.
 - Continued support for Magnet schools designed to eliminate racial isolation, with added emphasis on socioeconomic status as a means to support comprehensive integration.
- **A Smart and Balanced Approach to Testing:** The bill maintains important statewide assessments to ensure that teachers and parents can mark the progress and performance of their children every year, from third to eighth grade and once in high school. The bill encourages a smarter approach to testing by moving away from a sole focus on standardized tests to drive decisions around the quality of schools, and by allowing for the use of multiple measures of student learning and progress, along with other indicators of student success to make school accountability decisions. It also includes provisions consistent with the Administration’s principles around reducing the amount of classroom time spent on standardized testing, including support for state efforts to audit and streamline their current assessment systems and pilot new innovative assessments.
 - **Promoting Equity in State and Local Funding:** The Administration has called repeatedly for states and school districts to more equitably distribute state and local dollars to schools with the greatest need. The bill includes a pilot program – similar to a proposal put forward by the Administration this year in the Fiscal Year 2016 budget – that provides for weighted student funding. Under the pilot, districts must demonstrate a commitment to equitable distribution of state and local dollars – based on actual per-pupil expenditures – to their highest poverty schools. In exchange, districts would be allowed to allocate and use Title I and other federal formula funds in a more flexible manner to support comprehensive plans that improve achievement and outcomes for their neediest students. The bill also includes provisions that require reporting on actual school-level expenditures, allowing the public for the first time to see the amount of federal, state, and local funding distributed to each and every school.

Where We Go From Here

Our nation’s elementary and secondary schools are improving, with more students graduating and learning valuable skills that can carry them into the future. A strong P-12 school system is an economic imperative for working and middle class Americans – and for our entire country. Every student deserves the opportunity to rise as far as their hard work and initiative will take them.

ESSA is a critical step forward as we continue to make progress, maintaining guardrails and protections for the most vulnerable students and directing federal resources toward what works in helping all children learn. All children should have an equal opportunity, and the Administration will continue to fight to make sure they do.