



COLLEGE AND CAREER READY GRADUATION:

STRENGTHENING THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION ACT

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The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was enacted in 1965 with the goal of providing federal resources to states and districts for compensatory services that would improve the achievement of low-income students. Since that time, periodic reauthorizations of ESEA have provided powerful moments to revisit, refine, and refocus the federal investment in our nation's K-12 schools and their students.

The landmark 2002 No Child Left Behind reauthorization committed the federal government to a more central role in driving states and districts toward demonstrating measurable improvement in student achievement. The upcoming reauthorization provides an opportunity to build on the best aspects of current law and its federal-state-district partnership. It also introduces an opportunity to revisit provisions that have been less effective or have created unintended obstacles to achieving the goal of high achievement for all students, particularly students from low-income families, who have always been the focus of ESEA.

ALL STUDENTS COLLEGE AND CAREER READY

A strong consensus is developing among states, districts, and key stakeholders that the ultimate goal of K-12 education must be for all students not just to graduate from high school but to graduate with the requisite skills to succeed in completing a postsecondary credential and entering a career. This consensus is reflected in the state-led Common Core Standards Initiative. It also underlies and has been further advanced by unprecedented new federal education investments through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, particularly by the assurances required of states wishing to apply for Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation (i3) funds, and school improvement grants. Looking forward, ESEA reauthorization provides an opportunity to seize on steadily building momentum toward policies focused on what it will take to achieve the college- and career-ready goal.

Our recommendations focus on a related critical aspect of the emerging federal-state-district approach to K-12 improvement. *The reauthorization of ESEA provides an opportunity to focus greater federal policy attention than ever before on secondary school improvement—and to strengthen incentives that encourage states and districts to help all high school-age students advance and succeed, particularly low-income students who are off track to graduate college- and career-ready and those who drop out without securing a meaningful diploma.*

Very early in his Presidency, Barack Obama laid out a bold vision of returning America to international primacy in postsecondary attainment. He noted that major obstacles to achieving that critical goal were the unacceptably high dropout rate across our nation and the weak preparation of too many high school graduates. According to Jobs for the Future's analysis of national data, the number of off-track low-income students who need easier access to proven routes to college readiness and success is huge. About 480,000 low-income youth who start high school each year



will fail to graduate; another 825,000 low-income young people who will graduate high school will do so unprepared to succeed in college-level work. Low income alone puts young people at significant risk: about 125,000 *college-ready* low-income high school graduates from a given cohort will ultimately fail to earn a degree.

In the years following the enactment of No Child Left Behind, federal policy efforts built upon and elevated the work of the National Governors Association's 50-state Graduation Counts Compact, with a cohort approach to measuring graduation rates that has generated far more accurate information about the magnitude of the dropout crisis. Congress should heed this groundbreaking work and, in addition, take advantage of regulatory actions taken near the end of the previous Administration that strengthened graduation rate definition and accountability.

Evidence-based models now exist of middle and high schools that beat the odds with low-income and struggling students. For example, the more than 200 early college high schools around the country, which integrate secondary and postsecondary learning in a rigorous college-connected curriculum, are showing significant evidence of success with low-income and too often underserved and underprepared students. These schools show particular promise at preparing low-income and minority students for college-level work and closing achievement gaps between these students and their higher-income peers. Random-assignment research about early college schools in North Carolina, funded by IES, shows that early college students complete more college preparatory courses than peers who attend other high schools. And data about early college schools nationally show that students graduate with an average of 23 college credits.

In addition, a number of cities are showing success with recovering and graduating students who are far off track in credits from finishing high school or have already dropped out altogether. From New York City to the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo district in South Texas, new "back on track" models are graduating these young people at rates two or three times higher than those of off-track students in "traditional" high schools. These back-on-track schools

are demonstrating that more effective instructional programs and supports can dramatically increase young people's odds of not just earning a high school equivalency credential but of graduating high school and doing so ready to succeed in a postsecondary credential program.

ESEA reauthorization provides an opportunity to take up the President's challenge and to address the needs of all young people so they graduate high school—and graduate with sufficient momentum to succeed in postsecondary learning. Congress should build on current and recent progress on four policy objectives: college- and career-ready standards and assessments; rigorous and fair graduation rate accountability; turning around low-performing schools; and incentives for innovation and invention that can help all young people graduate ready for college and career. To this end, JFF makes the following recommendations for ESEA reauthorization.

1. COLLEGE- AND CAREER-READY STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

Two decades after the start of the standards movement, an increasing number of states are making progress toward the adoption of higher academic standards. The Race to the Top Assessment Program will generate more accurate information about student achievement, growth, and progress toward on-time graduation. Clearer standards and better designed assessments will help students move more efficiently into college-level work. However, other methods for students to demonstrate readiness—particularly through successful college-level work while in high school—should be encouraged in addition to improved state assessments.

The U.S. Department of Education's efforts stand on the underlying premise that if states can better define standards and install effective assessments, then students will move more efficiently into college-level work. Yet there are additional powerful methods of demonstrating readiness. JFF makes the following recommendations to Congress:



Continue to provide incentives for states to adopt college- and career-ready standards and assessments.

Congress should continue to provide Race to the Top-type incentives for states to raise academic standards.

Allow the use of performance-based indicators, such as the completion of college coursework in high school, to demonstrate college- and career-readiness.

Many state higher education systems recognize that earning college credit in college-level English and math is an indicator of student preparedness and likelihood of completion. States such as Connecticut, Florida, Ohio, Texas, Virginia, and North Carolina are tracking and reporting (and the state of Washington is also rewarding) how well colleges are helping students achieve critical benchmarks that indicate momentum toward degree completion, such as success in gatekeeper math and English courses. As colleges move in this direction, K-12 systems should also use such indicators to allow high school students to demonstrate their readiness for college and a career.

2. RIGOROUS AND FAIR GRADUATION RATE ACCOUNTABILITY

As with few other topics in education reform today, there is strong consensus on the importance of specifying graduation rate accountability as well as accountability for student achievement. Advocates and policymakers agree that we must get more students across the finish line with a diploma in hand, ready for the next step to postsecondary education and training. JFF makes the following recommendations to Congress:

Define graduation rates and establish graduation rate accountability.

Building on current regulations, JFF recommends that Congress finish the job on graduation rate accountability by:

- Defining the graduation rate as a four-year cohort graduation rate adjusted for transfers in and transfers out.
- Requiring states to set aggressive annual measurable objectives for increasing the number of students who graduate.
- Authorizing the Secretary of Education to approve state proposals to use an extended-year graduation rate for designated schools, such as early college high schools and back-on-track schools.
- Allowing back-on-track schools to show interim progress toward annual measurable objectives through predictive indicators of student achievement, such as the number and percentage of students earning credit in core courses.
- Ensuring that any requirement by the Secretary that a percentage of students graduate under a four-year cohort graduation rate allows for an exemption mechanism, such as a waiver, for select schools that by design will require more than four years for students to complete (i.e., early college high schools and back-on-track schools).

3. TURNING AROUND LOW-PERFORMING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

NCLB provisions to improve low-performing schools have had little impact on the 2,000 low graduation rate high schools that account for over half of the nation's dropouts. Many of these schools with graduation rates below 65 percent have not yet been identified as low performing, in part because graduation rate regulations have yet to go into effect. The "differentiated accountability pilot program" and the recent ARRA school improvement grant requirements for identifying persistently low-performing schools have established a framework for distinguishing among troubled schools and driving the most intensive reform strategies to those schools that are the lowest performing. These developments are essential to advancing the development and scaling up of quality pathways, especially for those students who are far off track to



graduation. Congress should adopt school-turnaround provisions that provide incentives and resources for states, districts, and high schools to implement strategies and models that meet the needs of large numbers of off-track students. JFF makes the following recommendations to Congress:

Permit differentiated accountability.

Allow states to distinguish schools and districts in need of intensive interventions from those that may be closer to meeting annual measurable objectives.

Place a priority on low graduation rate high schools.

Require states and districts to target immediate action at secondary schools with graduation rates below 65 percent.

Require specific school-turnaround activities.

Require schools identified for turnaround to analyze data to determine the number and percentage of students who are significantly off track and to identify strategies and models to put them back on track to graduation.

Require district-wide activities.

District-level leadership is essential for systemic approaches to implementing strategies and models that serve the large number of off-track students and dropouts in a community. Congress can create incentives by:

- Requiring districts and schools to use early warning indicators to intervene more quickly and provide support for students before they fall too far behind and increase their risk of dropping out.
- Requiring districts to analyze and use data on the district-wide off-track population in order to design interventions and put in place back-on-track alternative education options (e.g., transfer schools).
- Requiring districts to develop and implement district-wide dropout recovery strategies in partnership with community-based organizations (e.g., reengagement centers and back-on-track alternative education options, including GED-to-college programs).

4. INCENTIVES, INNOVATION, AND INVENTION

One of the most promising recent federal policy developments is the expansion of federal support for innovation at all levels to address the nation's most perplexing education reform challenges. The ARRA-funded Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation grant programs commit the federal government to fostering innovation in practice and policy. In response, states and districts are changing policies and advancing ambitious plans to scale up effective programs and practices. The i3 competitive grants have also opened important space for innovators to experiment with and invent new strategies for improving education outcomes for the most at risk. JFF makes the following recommendations to Congress:

Invest in scaling up what works.

Nationally, numerous strategies and school models, such as early college high schools, have demonstrated effectiveness in increasing college- and career-readiness for low-income high school age students. Congress should continue Race to the Top, i3, and other funding streams that focus resources to ensure more widespread adoption and implementation of innovation strategies and approaches at secondary schools.

Invest in invention.

The nation will not move the needle dramatically on graduation rates without combining the redesign of failing high schools with a sustained effort to invent of new models designed to help young people get back on track to high school graduation and postsecondary attainment. In the major cities that are ground zero of the dropout crisis, educators, youth developers, and social entrepreneurs have begun to invent solutions that are achieving "beat the odds" results. Along with scaling up innovative strategies, Congress should support continuing research and development of new school models that show promise in serving off-track students, English learners, and students in rural areas.



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