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NATIONAL NEWS

- 1) [Presidential candidates tend to avoid education issues](#); Mathews – Washington Post
- 2) [Helping Teachers Help Themselves](#); Winerip – New York Times
- 3) [Analysis Finds Graduation Rates Moving Up](#); Swanson – Education Week

FLORIDA NEWS

- 4) [State education department to release algebra scores](#); McGrory – Miami Herald
- 5) [Does technology make students smarter or more distracted?](#); Travis – Sun Sentinel
- 6) [John Winn to return to Florida Department of Education as interim commissioner](#); Solochek – St. Petersburg Times

STATE NEWS

- 7) [Pennsylvania State Education Association backs use of test scores in evaluating teachers](#); Hardy – Philadelphia Inquirer
- 8) [New Jersey high school graduation rate is highest in the nation, review says](#); Calefati – New Jersey Star-Ledger
- 9) [Program uses Detroit Public School teachers to assist, mentor peers](#); Chambers – Detroit News

NATIONAL NEWS

Presidential candidates tend to avoid education issues

Washington Post

By: Jay Mathews

June 5, 2011

http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/presidential-candidates-tend-to-avoid-education-issues/2011/06/03/AGqDloJH_story.html

Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney declared his candidacy for president last week. I went to his [Web site](#) to read his ideas about education. There weren't any. The same thing happened when I went to former House speaker Newt Gingrich's [campaign site](#).

Former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty's Web site had a bit more — a piece beating up on teachers unions, a speech saying the federal government should give states more flexibility in fixing schools and an appreciation of former D.C. schools chancellor Michelle A. Rhee. Business executive Herman Cain's Web site called for less federal and union interference in education reform and more rewards for the best teachers. Rep. Ron Paul (Tex.) wants to end federal education spending, except for tax credits for parents.

That's about it for the Republican candidates. I couldn't find official education positions for potential GOP candidates Jon Huntsman, Michele Bachmann or Sarah Palin. Even when the presidential campaign gets hot next year, we won't hear much about schooling from either party. The government activity that most influences American lives has never inspired much talk by national politicians or much coverage by national media.

Why?

Public schools in America began as local enterprises. They mostly remain so today. Some presidential candidates have tried to make them a big issue. Remember former Vermont governor Howard Dean's attacks on standardized testing when he sought the Democratic nomination in 2004? It didn't work. Education issues have never had a significant impact on a national election.

That frustrates many voters, particularly teachers, who think we have gone too far in using standardized tests to measure schools. The teachers unions have tried to get Democratic leaders to do something about this. The major Democratic candidates in 2008, when speaking to teachers groups, called for better assessments. But it wasn't a major campaign theme.

Democratic and Republican leaders almost never admit this, but in the past 30 years they have been allies in trying to raise achievement by judging schools by test scores. The principles of the 2002 No Child Left Behind law began with Southern Democratic governors such as Richard W. Riley and Bill Clinton in the 1980s.

The two President Bushes picked up that theme, as did many Republican governors. But if Democrat Al Gore had become president in 2001, Congress still would have passed a law much like No Child Left Behind. The 2000 Bush and Gore education platforms were hard to tell apart, other than the routine disagreement over school vouchers (Republicans for, Democrats against) that both parties found useful in giving their bases the false impression that they have deep educational differences.

My colleague Valerie Strauss has turned her lively [Answer Sheet blog](#) into a haven for teachers, parents and other school enthusiasts enraged by the grip testing has on education policy. She taps into powerful emotions and compelling arguments. But anti-testing people have little impact on policy because their argument is so hard to sell to voters.

A candidate who says we should not be using tests to judge schools will always be asked in the first debate: "So, you don't want our schools to be accountable? Taxpayers shouldn't have some proof that their dollars are well spent?"

I share the concern about standardized tests, particularly those used by states. I would prefer oral or deep essay exams. But like most Americans I am not ready to dump or marginalize the tests we have until we have an acceptable substitute. Standardized tests are flawed, but they make sense in a national culture that insists on fair measures of merit. If you don't think so, take a look at my hate mail when I rant against the SAT.

The most successful American politicians know that and are no more willing to turn against testing than they are to come up with a radically different system for paying the medical bills of us geezers. I suspect we will straighten out Medicare long before we agree on better ways to measure what our schools are doing. So if you crave an education debate, prepare to be bored in 2012.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Helping Teachers Help Themselves

New York Times

By: Michael Winerip

June 5, 2011

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/06/education/06oneducation.html?_r=1

ROCKVILLE, Md. — The [Montgomery County Public Schools](#) system here has a highly regarded program for evaluating teachers, providing them extra support if they are performing poorly and getting rid of those who do not improve.

The program, [Peer Assistance and Review](#) — known as PAR — uses several hundred senior teachers to mentor both newcomers and struggling veterans. If the mentoring does not work, the PAR panel — made up of eight teachers and eight principals — can vote to fire the teacher.

Sitting in on two cases last week, I could not tell from the comments which of the panel members were teachers and which were principals. In one of the cases, 11 of the 12 panel members present voted to follow a principal's recommendation and discipline the teacher; in the other, they decided in a 10-to-2 vote to reject a principal's recommendation and support the teacher.

In the 11 years since PAR began, the panels have voted to fire 200 teachers, and 300 more have left rather than go through the PAR process, said [Jerry D. Weast](#), the superintendent of the Montgomery County system, which enrolls 145,000 students, one-third of them from low-income families. In the 10 years before PAR, he said, five teachers were fired. "It took three to five years to build the trust to get PAR in place," he explained. "Teachers had to see we weren't playing gotcha."

Doug Prouty, the teachers' union president, said, "It wouldn't work without the level of trust we have here."

Nancy S. Grasmick, [Maryland's state superintendent of schools](#), called PAR "an excellent system for professional development." Senior staff members from the United States Department of Education have visited here to study the program, and Montgomery County officials have gone to Washington to explain how it works. In February, the district was [one of 12 featured in Denver at a Department of Education conference](#) on labor-management collaboration.

Dr. Weast, who calls the United States secretary of education, Arne Duncan, "a good friend," said, "He's told me, 'Jerry, you're going where the country needs to go.'"

Unfortunately, federal dollars from the Obama administration's [Race to the Top](#) program are not going where Dr. Weast and the PAR program need to go. Montgomery County schools were entitled to \$12 million from Race to the Top, but Dr. Weast said he would not take the money because the grant required districts to include students' state test results as a measure of teacher quality. "We don't believe the tests are reliable," he said. "You don't want to turn your system into a test factory."

Race to the Top aims to spur student growth by improving teacher quality, which is exactly what Montgomery County is doing. Sad to say, the district is getting the right results the wrong way.

It does not seem to matter that 84 percent of Montgomery County students go on to college and that 63 percent earn degrees there — the very variables that President Obama has said should be the true measure of academic success. It does not seem to matter that 2.5 percent of all black children in America who pass an [Advanced Placement test](#) live in Montgomery County, more than five times its share of the nation's black population.

The 12 states that were awarded the billions of dollars in Race to the Top grants are using student scores as a measure of teachers' worth. New York has decided that state tests will count for up to 40 percent of a teacher's grade; Maryland does not have a magic number yet.

Mr. Duncan's supporters have marveled at how he has used Race to the Top money to pressure states into adopting his education agenda. Dr. Grasmick, the Maryland superintendent, said the administration made it clear that if a state wanted to win a grant, the proposal had to include a formula for calculating student growth. Maryland toed the line and was awarded \$250 million.

Asked if the state could make an exception for Montgomery because of the PAR program's history of success, Dr. Grasmick said Gov. Martin O'Malley had been told that no modifications were allowed. Nor are districts permitted to appeal to federal officials, said Ann Whalen, director of the Implementation and Support Unit at the Education Department.

So here is where things stand: Montgomery's PAR program, which has worked beautifully for 11 years, is not acceptable. But the Maryland plan — which does not exist yet — meets federal standards.

Dr. Weast said a major failing of Race to the Top's teacher-evaluation system is that it is being imposed from above rather than being developed by the teachers and administrators who will use it. "People don't tear down what they help build," he said.

Maybe that is why Race to the Top has been divisive in so many places. In Maryland, teachers' unions in 22 of the 24 districts refused to sign the state's grant proposal. In New York and New Jersey, the competition has made the war between the unions and state officials even nastier.

Every politician who micromanages education today should visit a PAR meeting.

At a session on Thursday, a principal recommended that the panel give a tenured middle school teacher a year to improve before deciding whether to dismiss her. The principal argued that the woman did not meet three of the district's six teaching standards: how to effectively teach the students, how to assess students and help them grow academically, and how to act professionally.

Among other things, the principal told the panel that the teacher's lesson plans were too vague and created on the fly; that her students were not being challenged; that her assessment of them was weak, and that most were given A's; and that she repeatedly missed meetings and did not work well with her colleagues.

A senior teacher testified that she had not noticed problems when observing the classroom. The middle school teacher then defended herself and was questioned by the panel, which discussed the case after she left.

Panel members said they were concerned that the teacher had not saved her lesson plans from year to year; that the principal had given her an improvement plan in October, but she had not begun to carry it out until January; and that she complained about having insufficient curriculum materials, but had not tried to correct the problem.

After 90 minutes, panel members voted to provide her with weekly mentoring visits from a senior teacher, with the caveat that if she did not show improvement she could be dismissed.

Administrators and union officials credited the good will developed through PAR for some of the district's other successes. Five years ago, the district created a budget committee, half of whose members belonged to unions. Last year, when Larry Bowers, the district's finance director, said the schools could not afford a scheduled 5.3 percent raise, the teachers' union agreed. "Saved us \$89 million," Mr. Bowers said.

Mr. Prouty, the union president, said he knew Mr. Bowers was telling the truth. "We formulate the budget; we know where the money is, which makes us much more trusting," said Mr. Prouty, whose members also agreed to forgo a raise next year.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Analysis Finds Graduation Rates Moving Up Strong signs of improvement on graduation

Education Week

By: Christopher B. Swanson

June 9, 2011

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/06/09/34analysis.h30.html?>

[tkn=TMSFrGik4J%2FrGAwSLwVThr2oKrm3odpwPhOk&cmp=clp-edweek&intc=EW-DC11-EWH](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/06/09/34analysis.h30.html?tkn=TMSFrGik4J%2FrGAwSLwVThr2oKrm3odpwPhOk&cmp=clp-edweek&intc=EW-DC11-EWH)

For more than two years, average Americans have followed reports on unemployment, the housing market, commodity prices, consumer confidence, and the daily fluctuations of the markets for signals that the economy has finally, and firmly, entered a period of renewed growth and stability. So too have education-watchers been on the lookout, for the better part of a decade, for signs of an educational recovery.

At the heart of the reform agenda lie commitments to combat the U.S. dropout crisis and propel the nation's schools and its

economy at full speed into the 21st century, by ensuring that all students have a chance to earn a meaningful diploma that prepares them for further education and training and a successful adult life. The administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama have espoused such goals, as have major philanthropies, leading nonprofit organizations, prominent business leaders, and state and district policymakers from coast to coast. Even with this high-profile attention and a host of new policy efforts, gaining traction on graduation has been frustratingly difficult.

That is, perhaps, until now.

A new analysis of high school completion from the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center finds that the national graduation rate stands at 71.7 percent for the class of 2008, the most recent year for which data are available. The highest level of graduation for the nation's public high schools since the 1980s, this result also marks a significant turnaround following two consecutive years of declines and stagnation.

The research center calculates graduation rates for the nation, states, and every public school district in the country using the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) method and data from the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data.

Despite such clear indications of progress, the fact is that too many students continue to fall through the cracks of America's high schools. We project that, nearly 1.2 million students from this year's high school class will fail to graduate with a diploma. That amounts to 6,400 students lost each day of the year, or one student every 27 seconds.

A Class Portrait

A detailed snapshot of results reveals two patterns that speak as much to public education's past as its future. The graduation-rate recovery evident in the broadest national statistics is shared widely, across demographic groups. Even those substantial strides, however, have done little to close the historical disparities that define graduation gaps along the lines of race, gender, and geography.

The overall graduation rate for public high school students jumped nearly 3 percentage points from 2007 to 2008, more than offsetting the nationwide declines of the previous two years. Each major racial and ethnic group also posted gains of at least 2 percentage points, with African-American students improving most rapidly.

The nation's graduation rate rose by 6.1 percentage points over all of the past decade. During the same period, the black-white graduation gap narrowed by 2 points, owing to the more rapid progress made by African-Americans. Because improvement for whites outpaced that of other groups, though, the gaps between Native Americans and whites and between Latinos and whites have widened somewhat since 1999.

Asian-Americans and whites remain the nation's highest-performing groups, posting graduation rates of 83 percent and 78 percent, respectively, for the class of 2008.

Gaps a Concern

Although the rates for key historically underserved groups have improved over time, they remain a cause for concern. Among Latinos in the class of 2008, 58 percent finished high school with a diploma, while 57 percent of African-Americans and 54 percent of Native Americans graduated. On average, 68 percent of male students earn a diploma compared with 75 percent of female students, a 7-percentage-point gender gap that has remained virtually unchanged for years. High school completion rates for minority males consistently fall near or below the 50 percent mark.

Suburban districts graduate considerably more students on average than do those serving urban communities, 76 percent vs. 64 percent. Regardless of location, graduation rates in districts characterized by heightened levels of poverty or racial or socioeconomic segregation fall well below the national average, typically ranging from 58 percent to 63 percent.

In addition, the 44-percentage-point chasm separating the highest- and lowest-performing states remains alarming. The national leaders—New Jersey, North Dakota, Vermont, and Wisconsin—each graduate more than 80 percent of their high school students. At the other extreme of the rankings, fewer than six in 10 students finish high school in the District of Columbia, Georgia, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico, and South Carolina. Overall, graduation rates in about half the states fall within 5 points of the national average of 72 percent.

Graduation rates have also risen in a large majority of states during the past decade. Thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia have posted gains ranging from a fraction of a percent to 20 percentage points over that time span. Among the states that have lost ground, all but one of the declines were on the order of 5 percentage points or less.

Perspectives On Performance

For the past several years, *Diplomas Count* has assessed district performance using measures that move beyond such conventional metrics as making comparisons against national or state averages. In the 2009 and 2010 editions of the report, for example, the EPE Research Center identified several dozen "overachieving" school system—large, urban districts with graduation rates much higher than would be expected, based on a detailed profile comprising 10 distinct characteristics, including size, location, poverty level, and structural features.

This year, the center performs a similar statistical analysis for the nation's 50 largest school districts, a group that includes big inner-city school districts as well as large countywide school systems.

Urban districts, perhaps predictably, occupy the lowest spots on the rankings, often graduating no more than half their students and as few as one-third. Montgomery County, Md., and Fairfax County, Va., respectively, rank first and second among the nation's largest districts, with graduation rates topping 85 percent, more than 50 percentage points higher than Detroit, the lowest-ranked district.

Graduation rates are below the national average in 39 of the 50 largest districts. But even though they fall short of that benchmark, many of those school systems fare more favorably when compared against similarly situated districts. For example, Long Beach, Calif., posts a graduation rate of 71.4 percent for the class of 2008. Just shy of the U.S. average, that rate is actually 6 percentage points higher than expected for a district with a comparable size and sociodemographic profile. Top-ranked Montgomery County beats expectations (by 10 points), while graduation rates in Detroit are 15 points lower than expected.

Diplomas, Degrees, And Dollars

Policymakers and reform leaders increasingly make the case for aggressive measures to improve schools, particularly at the secondary level, in both economic and educational terms. A more educated population, the argument goes, leads to a workforce that is better prepared for the rapidly escalating and shifting skill demands of a 21st-century global economy.

The observation that more schooling is economically beneficial is so widely accepted that it prompts little further reflection. Long-term labor-market trends, for example, show a dual pattern of increasing educational attainment among workers, coupled with steadily rising financial returns to a postsecondary education over time. And indeed, each successive level of education completed or credential acquired does ratchet up earnings.

So, in many ways, the attention now being placed on college readiness makes perfect sense as a way both to provide students with a high-quality education and to place the economy on a firmer footing for the future. But, as explored throughout *Diplomas Count 2011*, some critics have raised concerns that the “college” in the phrase “college readiness” has too often been interpreted as a call specifically to promote four-year degrees. The danger of such a narrow working definition of a college education, it is argued, lies in potentially devaluing forms of postsecondary education and training short of a baccalaureate degree that may provide substantial benefits to individuals and the larger economy.

To further explore these dynamics, the EPE Research Center conducted an original analysis of data from the American Community Survey, which collects information on 3 million individuals every year. The ACS offers a valuable opportunity to draw connections between educational histories, labor-market experiences, and career backgrounds.

Thirty-nine percent of the prime working-age population (ages 25 to 54) has completed no more than a high school education, compared with roughly equal proportions of workers with at least a bachelor’s degree and with a subbaccalaureate postsecondary education (at 31 and 30 percent, respectively). The 39 million Americans who constitute the latter category include recipients of associate degrees and those with some postsecondary experience but no degree.

Income data from 2009 show that annual earnings increase significantly as workers acquire progressively higher levels of education. Median earnings for adults who have not completed high school stand at only \$12,000. Acquiring a high school diploma generates an additional \$10,000 of earnings on average, with any amount of subbaccalaureate postsecondary education (including an associate degree) raising income an additional \$8,000 a year, to almost \$30,000. The typical four-year degree-holder earns about \$50,000 a year.

Focusing just on average returns to schooling, however, overlooks the substantial overlap between the earnings distributions for workers with different levels of educational attainment. For instance, more than a quarter of adults with an associate degree have incomes at or above the median level of four-year college graduates. Put another way, substantial numbers of less-than-B.A. workers enjoy economic benefits comparable to those with a four-year college degree.

One factor contributing to these overlapping economic returns is the inexact relationship between credentials and occupations. Yes, practicing lawyers must hold J.D.s, and physicians require M.D.s. But more often than not, educational requirements for particular jobs are not so well-defined or clear-cut. In public education, for example, K-12 teacher licensure now typically requires at least a bachelor’s degree (although this does not apply to the private sector). But some jobs may place a greater emphasis on demonstrated skills and experience than on formal education and credentials.

Using ACS data, the EPE Research Center characterized 469 distinct occupations based on the educational level of typical job-holders. Relatively few occupations displayed the tight educational requirements of the traditional professions. In fact, nearly 30 percent of all occupations did not yield a dominant educational profile. But the analysis did identify 50 occupations in which the majority of workers had a subbaccalaureate level of schooling.

Median income levels within that segment of the labor market vary dramatically. Massage therapists, for example, typically earn only \$18,000 a year, somewhat below the income of the average high school graduate. At the other end of that range are annual earnings of \$73,000 for managers in the firefighting and fire-prevention field. Although most of those workers do not hold bachelor’s degrees, they out-earn the typical graduate of a four-year college by a margin of \$23,000 per year.

To borrow a phrase from the world of product promotions and disclaimers: Those results may not be typical. On average, more education tends to produce more-desirable economic outcomes.

That said, the labor-force experiences of bachelor’s-degree holders and those with less postsecondary education are both quite diverse and, more to the point, can be quite similar to one another. That suggests it’s wise to guard against the tendency to define a meaningful “college” experience in overly narrow or prescriptive terms.

Progress on Policy

Every year, *Diplomas Count* assesses the status of state policies that may affect graduation. An original survey of the 50 states and the District of Columbia conducted by the EPE Research Center tracks activity on 18 policy indicators in three broad areas: college- and work-readiness definitions, high school completion credentials, and high school exit exams.

For the first time, a majority of states (33) report having established definitions of college readiness that capture the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in entry-level college courses. That number represents a large increase over the 23 states defining college readiness last year. Such a quantum leap likely reflects a convergence of such factors as increasing emphasis on readiness in national policy forums, the accelerating influence of the common-standards movement, and the culmination of pre-existing state-led efforts to improve students’ college readiness.

Thirty-three states also have comparable frameworks for work readiness in place. As with definitions of college readiness, states typically articulate those expectations in terms of coursetaking recommendations, academic standards, minimum scores on standardized tests, or sets of applicable skills.

Beyond the domain of college and work readiness, *Diplomas Count* finds relatively little state-policy movement during the past year in areas related to high school graduation. Course requirements for earning a standard diploma held steady at 21 credits, with half the states also linking that credential to a high school exit exam. Twenty-six states issue advanced diplomas or recognitions for exceeding the basic expectations for graduation, while 29 offer alternative certificates for those who do not complete the standard requirements.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

FLORIDA NEWS

State education department to release algebra scores

Miami Herald

By: Kathleen McGrory

June 8, 2011

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/06/08/2255729/state-education-department-to.html>

The state Department of Education on Wednesday will release the results of Florida's first ever end-of-course exam in algebra.

The computerized exam was given in May to students enrolled in Algebra I.

The algebra exam ushers in a new style of testing for Florida's high schoolers. The education department plans to add biology and geometry end-of-course tests next year.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Does technology make students smarter or more distracted?

Sun Sentinel

By: Scott Travis

June 7, 2011

<http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/palm-beach/fl-technology-effect-learning-20110607.0.2135126.story>

For many, it brings as many problems as benefits

On just about any college campus, students walk with their heads down and fingers on their phones — staying connected and learning, they say.

Their iPhones and Droids help them to do research, record lectures and photograph lab samples. For younger children, technology such as animation, games and videos help improve reading and vocabulary by bringing subjects to life, said Richard Gentry, a childhood literacy educator and author in Fort Lauderdale.

But research also shows the technology, if overused, can leave students feeling disconnected, stressed, lonely and unproductive. Students in a recent survey by the Chronicle of Higher Education said they wasted too much time online, and that their online conversations felt less real than face-to-face ones. When forced to disconnect for long stretches at a time, they say they initially felt anxiety or panic.

"It's a double-edged sword," said Andrea Corn, a psychologist in Lighthouse Point. "Kids today have opportunities prior generations never had to really expand their own universe. There's a world of information at their fingertips. But when there's the Internet, there are always going to be temptations."

And opportunities to get distracted.

Roxy Rodriguez, 21, a senior at Florida Atlantic University in [Boca Raton](#), admits to being obsessed with her HTC smartphone, which she uses to watch movies and TV shows, update her Facebook status and text friends.

"My phone is my life," she said. "I left it at home one day, and I felt so out of the loop."

She said she sometimes surfs the Internet in class, only half-paying attention to the instructor. Her 2.8 grade point average would be stronger if she weren't so distracted, she said.

Professors complain about students zoning out as they surf the Internet. Fred Hoffman, a math professor at FAU, said he can't ban laptops, iPads or smartphones because a growing number of students download electronic versions of their class textbook on the devices. But that opens the door for more students to use them in class, he said.

"You have one student surfing the Internet, another (instant messaging) their friends, and Lord knows what else," he said. "I'm sure in some big classes, there are kids watching porn."

Monica DeTure, FAU's assistant provost for e-learning, said if too many students are distracted, it may be an indication the teaching needs to be improved. She said many students have a difficult time maintaining attention during a 50-minute passive lecture.

K-12 schools also struggle with how to incorporate laptops and iPads into classroom activities, while preventing students from surfing the web or playing video games. The school district in Liverpool, N.Y. phased out a program to issue laptops to students in 2007, after seeing few academic benefits and many problems. Students used them to exchange answers on tests, download

pornography and hack into local businesses, the New York Times reported.

But at North Broward Preparatory School in Coconut Creek, all students in Grades 6-12 have laptops, which are used for a variety of educational activities, such as multimedia journalism and simulated lab work. School officials say they don't have too many problems.

Teachers walk around the class to make sure students stay engaged in the lesson, officials said, and there are filters to block out inappropriate sites.

The school is implementing a pilot project next year where students use smartphones in class. For example, they may use them to answer surveys or multiple-choice questions, with the class results instantly displayed on a screen.

"They're going to have them anyway," said Phil Wernersbach, director of technology for the school. "We might as well put them to good use."

FAU's Hoffman said that even with stellar instruction students can probably find something that interests them more on the Internet.

Gina Ragusa, of Davie, said she had to limit the video game usage of her son, Alex Caruso.

Injured in a skateboarding accident last year, he began playing "World of Warcraft" for hours each day, even after he recovered.

"I would see him rush through his homework with half the effort, because he was dying to get back to the game," she said. "I finally had to say, 'No more,' and I cut him off."

She limits him to an hour during the weekend and said he's now playing basketball and hanging out with friends more. But Alex said he's frustrated.

"She won't even let me play when my friends are over," he said. "I don't think it got out of hand as much as she thought it did."

[\(Back to top\)](#)

John Winn to return to Florida Department of Education as interim commissioner

St. Petersburg Times

By: Jeff Solocheck

June 8, 2011

<http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/gradebook/content/john-winn-return-florida-department-education>

John Winn, who helped create Florida's A-Plus plan under Jeb Bush, is returning to the Florida Department of Education as interim commissioner, beginning June 11. The Florida Board of Education unanimously approved Winn's selection.

Winn will replace Eric Smith, who leaves on June 10. Also resigning is chancellor Frances Haithcock, a key member of Smith's team. Mike Grego, former Hillsborough assistant superintendent who recently quit as Osceola schools superintendent, will serve as interim chancellor alongside Winn.

Read more about the appointments [today on tampabay.com](#).

[\(Back to top\)](#)

STATE NEWS

Pennsylvania State Education Association backs use of test scores in evaluating teachers

Philadelphia Inquirer

By: Dan Hardy

June 7, 2011

http://articles.philly.com/2011-06-07/news/29629440_1_largest-teachers-union-teacher-performance-evaluation

Pennsylvania's largest teachers union has issued its strongest endorsement to date for using student test scores in evaluating teachers, and proposed a streamlined dismissal process for educators and principals.

The positions, outlined by James P. Testerman, president of the Pennsylvania State Education Association, are part of the union's "Solutions That Work" proposal, unveiled Monday. It also includes pitches for longtime union goals such as a focus on struggling schools, more parental involvement, and enhanced school safety.

No uniform statewide teacher-evaluation process exists. Most districts judge teacher effectiveness through classroom observations by school officials.

The Corbett administration wants to institute statewide evaluation procedures that would start by the 2012-13 school year. Education Secretary Ronald J. Tomalis said Monday that such a plan would use student performance as a primary way of judging teacher ability, adding that he welcomed the union's stand.

The union - which represents 120,000 teachers in 483 of the state's 500 school districts, plus 40,000 support staff - implicitly endorsed the idea of using student test scores to evaluate teachers when it backed the state's bid in 2010 for a federal Race to the Top grant. Using student scores in judging teacher performance was a condition of getting the money.

But Monday, Testerman said, was "the first time we have publicly said [the use of test scores] should play a role in how teachers are evaluated." The union, he said, is working with the state Department of Education and other stakeholders in a project that is scheduled to come up with recommendations on a new system by the end of this year.

Tomalis said that "it's good to see another organization join the chorus that many of us have been talking about for years and that the Corbett administration embraces." Asked whether the union and the Corbett administration had similar views on teacher evaluation, he said: "The devil is in the details."

Testerman said that for unacceptable classroom performance, a teacher can be dismissed after two evaluations, four months apart, if he or she is given a chance to show improvement. After a school board votes to dismiss someone, he said, the grievance procedure often takes from a year to 18 months if a teacher chooses to contest it.

The union, he said, wants a change to state law that would mandate a 90-day period for both sides to make their case and an arbitrator's decision within 30 more days.

Tomalis said, "It's good to hear PSEA leadership acknowledge that we need to be able to remove teachers in the classroom that don't deserve to be in the classroom. . . . I'm glad to see them joining in that cause."

[\(Back to top\)](#)

N.J. high school graduation rate is highest in the nation, review says

New Jersey Star-Ledger

By: Jessica Calefati

The Star-Ledger June 07, 2011

http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/06/nj_high_school_graduation_rate.html

New Jersey awards diplomas to 87 percent of its high school students, making the state's graduation rate the highest in the nation, an annual review released today shows.

Between 1998 and 2008, the state increased its pool of high school graduates by 11.1 percent, reflecting a national trend of graduation rate growth that took hold during the 2007-2008 school year, the Diplomas Count 2011 report found.

But the Christie administration quickly warned the state's number of high school graduates will likely decline once a more rigorous, federally mandated method for calculating the statistic takes effect next fall.

"We have excellent school programs and teachers who are doing a great job in helping our students graduate," acting Education Commissioner Christopher Cerf said in a statement. "However, it is important that we know if our students are truly college-ready by generating more comprehensive and transparent data."

The figure calculated by the report's authors falls 6 percentage points below the 93 percent graduation rate the state Department of Education published for the 2007-2008 school year. The report's methodology reflects the type of rigorous standards Cerf calls for, according to Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, a nonprofit organization based in Bethesda, Md.

Cerf could not be reached to discuss the apparent discrepancy.

But in his statement today, the education commissioner cited the high rate of first-time students at community colleges in Bergen, Union and Essex counties who must take remedial math and English courses as proof the state must do more to prepare its high school students for college and career.

"We are very proud of our graduation rate, but other studies show that we still have much work to do," Cerf said.

The New Jersey Education Association fired back at the Christie administration for recasting a positive report about the state's public schools into a condemnation, calling Cerf's response to the report a "broken record."

"The cup is always half-empty with this administration," said Steve Wollmer, a spokesman for the state's largest teachers union.

"Their agenda is to privatize education, and they never miss an opportunity to demean the achievements of our public schools, even when the criticism is unfounded."

Stan Karp, director of secondary reform at the nonprofit Newark-based Education Law Center, said New Jersey's standing in the graduation rate report is "basically good news," despite the Christie administration's comments. Only four other states had greater graduation rate increases than New Jersey over the 10 years of data the report's authors studied.

"I think we have had a narrative of failure coming from the administration that these statistics contradict," Karp said.

He pointed out that New Jersey is also doing better than other states on achievement-gap issues: The state boasts the highest graduation rate among Hispanic and African-American students.

Assembly Education Committee Chairman Patrick Diegnan (D-Middlesex) reflected the teachers union's frustration with Cerf's response to the data and said the Christie administration must stop its campaign to convince state residents their public schools are failing.

"When I drive around the state and talk to parents and other citizens of the Garden State, they are not surprised by the success of our schools," Diegnan said. "It's sad that the governor and our education commissioner designee do not share that same knowledge."

Staff writer Jeanette Rundquist contributed to this report.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Program uses DPS teachers to assist, mentor peers

Detroit News

By: Jennifer Chambers

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<http://www.detnews.com/article/20110608/SCHOOLS/106080331/1026/schools/Program-uses-DPS-teachers-to-assist--mentor-peers>

Detroit— It's not uncommon for Detroit Public Schools teachers to go years without an evaluation. Some have never had one.

But a new program that uses teachers to mentor and assist peers in the classroom is being credited with helping transform DPS as it attempts to retain students and attract new ones to counteract enrollment losses.

Twenty DPS teachers signed up for three years as coaches in the Peer Assistance and Review program, which gives teachers of all levels of experience over-the-shoulder mentoring in professional development, class lessons and curriculum planning.

"We have some really good teachers in the district. But Detroit is a different ball game. We have a different culture you have to become familiar with. And PAR is the vehicle to get things changed," said Vanessa Parnell, a teacher and program co-chair.

National and local teachers union leaders descended on a district school Tuesday to discuss the program. Officials, including American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and AFT-Michigan President David Hecker, toured Palmer Park Preparatory Academy, Michigan's first teacher-led school.

Keith Johnson, president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, which represents 4,600 instructors, said 70 to 80 teachers went through the program this school year. At the end, teachers either pass to continue teaching, get extra support and counseling, or receive a recommendation to retire, resign or otherwise end employment with the district.

"If the focus is on the child, the focus also has to be on who is in front of the child," Johnson said.

DPS' new emergency manager, Roy Roberts, attended the meeting for a brief time, listening to the stories of teachers who were initially called spies when they tried to help. Eventually, they were able to offer meaningful advice to instructors who admitted they needed some fresh ideas and support.

Roberts applauded the program, saying, "Culture will eat strategy for breakfast. If you don't change the culture, you haven't done a thing."

Weingarten said she was inspired by the program.

"This is an amazing process of taking responsibility and authority over our own profession ... and doing it in a period of time where there is tremendous crisis in Detroit, and still an eye on what we need to do with the kids."

[\(Back to top\)](#)