

P.A.S.S. ACT - Pathways for All Students to Succeed

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Senator Murray's Remarks

Background

Many of America's high schools, and their students, are in serious trouble- and it's getting worse. Each school day, about 3,000 secondary students drop out of school. This year alone, nearly 540,000 young people will leave school without attaining a high school diploma. Overall, the nation's high school graduation rate hovers at an abysmal 69 percent, but in urban areas that figure is even worse, with many districts graduating less than 50 percent of their students.

Sadly, even students who achieve a high school diploma are not guaranteed success in college or in life. About 40 percent of students enrolled in four-year colleges and 63 percent of those enrolled in community colleges enroll in at least one remedial course. And although about 70 percent of high school graduates enroll in college, only 7 percent from low-income families will have earned a baccalaureate degree by the age of 24, in great part because they have not been prepared in high school for the academic rigor of college. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that over this decade, 42 percent of projected job growth will be in fields that require a college degree or other post-secondary award.

These shocking statistics should - and must - serve as a clarion call to our nation's leaders. In order for our country to retain its economic strength and leadership, we can no longer ignore the educational needs of our adolescents. The P.A.S.S. Act will ensure that students in America's high schools receive the same intensive attention that No Child Left Behind provides for elementary school students. No Child Left Behind was a good beginning for ensuring accountability across all grades and on targeting resources for our youngest students to ensure they get a good academic start. However, for those initiatives to be successful in producing students prepared for postsecondary education and careers, we must complete the job and target the help needed at the middle and high school level to raise student achievement and sustain the investment we are making in the early years.

The P.A.S.S. Act is informed by proven research and practice on improving student achievement in the high school years. It empowers schools to provide the best possible support for students and

teachers, and provides direct, targeted assistance to the students most in need of help. Passage of the P.A.S.S. Act will demonstrate action at the national level that is desperately needed to help transform high schools across America – making them true centers of learning from which our country’s older children will emerge with the literacy skills and advanced knowledge needed for college and rewarding careers. America’s continuing economic strength and vigor of its civil society depends on the quality of its graduates who represent our nation’s future.

Title I: Reading to Succeed

The recently released 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores show that the reading achievement of American 4th graders has improved significantly since the tests were last administered in 1998. But the average performance of our 8th graders over the same period has remained flat: 29 percent of boys and 20 percent of girls in 8th grade are reading at “below basic” levels. Worse, the reading achievement of 12th graders has declined at all performance levels since 1998: 33 percent of 12th grader boys and 20 percent of 12th grade girls read below the “basic” level.

Title I of the P.A.S.S. Act will help ensure that secondary school students have the services and supports they need to read and write at or above their grade level, which is critical to their ability to succeed academically. Building on the success of the Reading First program, this Title will create “Reading to Succeed”, a \$1 billion grant program to establish effective, research-based reading and writing programs for students in grades 6 through 12, including limited English Proficient children and children with disabilities.

Grants will provide resources for secondary schools to hire literacy coaches (at least one per 20 teachers), who will help teachers incorporate research-based literacy instruction into their mathematics, science, history, civics, geography, literature, language arts, and other core academic courses. Literacy coaches will help teachers identify students who need additional reading instruction, assess those students to determine their needs and coordinate services to ensure students receive the services they need. They will also work with teachers to institute curricula that strengthen the reading and writing skills of all students. In addition to hiring literacy coaches, funds can be used to provide relevant professional development for literacy coaches and teachers, strengthen reading and writing curricula in middle and secondary schools, and implement diagnostic assessments, research-based curricula, instructional materials and interventions in secondary schools.

Title II: Pathways to Success

As American jobs increasingly require higher educational levels, it becomes more imperative that our nation's children graduate from high school prepared for success in postsecondary education and careers. Too many students struggle through to high school graduation only to discover that college doors are closed to them because they did not take the right courses or get good enough grades during their high school years.

Title II creates grants to provide academic and career counseling, cultivate parent engagement and coordinate support services for at-risk high school students across the country. Careful planning, sound advice and strong support are all critical to guiding students to success, but many of today's counselors struggle to serve too many students (an average of 1 to 450) with too few resources. A proven component of success in any endeavor is setting goals and developing plans to achieve them. That is the essence of Title II. It will complement other successful high school programs by providing \$2 billion to support the hiring and placement of Academic Counselors (at a rate of no less than 1 Academic Counselor to 150 students). These individuals will work directly with students, parents and teachers to develop six-year plans outlining the path each student in a high-need school will take to reach his or her goals. Academic Counselors will also coordinate new and existing resources (including other federal programs such as Title I, GEAR Up, TRIO, Dropout Prevention, Advance Placement Incentive Program Grants and Perkins Vocational Education) to ensure that students receive the services identified in their plans and facilitate a smooth transition to college or a career. Participating schools may hire a qualified individual to serve as an Academic Counselor, or may re-designate an existing professional provided that the professional is fully qualified and that the re-designation does not result in a reduction of services to students or a supplantation of current funding.

In addition to hiring and training Academic Counselors, funds may be used to assess the educational needs of incoming 9th graders and to coordinate coursework and supplemental services necessary to successfully implement student plans. Schools receiving grant funds must also ensure that a rigorous college preparatory curriculum is available to all students, including access to Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses. States will also receive funding to offer professional development and technical assistance to improve the effectiveness of Academic Counselors and other providers of similar student services. A portion of state funding may be used to foster statewide alignment of academic standards, graduation requirements, college entrance and success requirements and career skills, in order to facilitate student transitions and success.

Title III: Supporting Successful High Schools

Approximately 10 percent, or 800 of the schools which have been identified thus far as “in need of improvement”, are high schools. In approximately 1100 high schools, 75% or more of the students enrolled are living in poverty. Despite this, most reform efforts have been focused on elementary schools, with little attention paid to middle and high school needs. For example, only about 15 percent of Title I funding goes to high schools. In the No Child Left Behind Act, Title I funding should be used to help schools in need of improvement, but until Title I is fully funded, it is unlikely that high schools will receive a significant amount of these funds. Nonetheless, high schools are being held to the requirements of NCLB without a targeted source of funding to meet the standards and improve low-performing schools.

Title III of the P.A. S.S. Act will help educators turn around low-performing schools to ensure that every teenager is learning in a successful environment. This \$500 million grant program will allow districts to develop -- or identify and implement -- reforms that turn around low-performing schools and improve student achievement. For example, under Title III, districts can use funds to implement one of the most successful high school improvement strategies-- reducing the size of the high school learning environment by creating smaller schools or academies within larger schools. Districts can also use the funds to implement comprehensive school reform models that have demonstrated success in raising student achievement. Working with universities, nonprofit organizations, and research institutions, schools can adapt promising reform models to meet their needs. Districts receiving grant funds will be required to have a rigorous outside evaluation of the success of their high school reforms, and the results of these evaluations will be used to help other challenged high schools improve.