

The Every Student Counts Act (ESCA) creates a high school graduation rate calculation that is consistent across states, requires reporting of graduation rates for different categories of students, sets meaningful graduation rate goals and targets, and removes incentives for schools to push out low-performing and at-risk students.

BACKGROUND

ESCA was first introduced in the 110th Congress by Congressman Bobby Scott (VA-03) and Senator Tom Harkin (IA). Both Congressman Scott and Senator Harkin wanted to respond to the nation's worrisome high school graduation rates, which lag behind those of our international economic competitors. In the United States, one out of every three students who enters ninth grade each year fails to graduate from high school four years later. Worse, almost half of African American and Hispanic students fail to graduate during the same time frame. Special education students also have graduation rates that hover just over 50 percent.

At the time Congressman Scott and Senator Harkin first introduced their bills little was being done to remedy the nation's dropout crisis. Federal policy permitted the use of inconsistent and misleading graduation rate calculations that overestimated the number of graduating students, failed to require meaningful increases in graduation rates over time, and did not require the graduation rates of different categories of students to increase as part of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determinations. It was clear to many in the civil rights, special education, and education communities that change was needed.

Recognizing the need for new policy in this area, the Department of Education (ED) released regulations in October 2008 that created a uniform high school graduation rate calculation and ensured that improving graduation rates for all students was part of the federal accountability system.

Although the graduation rate regulations are a laudable step in the right direction, there remain areas of concern, including that they do not go far enough in setting clear, consistent, and high graduation rate goals with aggressive and attainable graduation rate growth targets. ED indicated that these policy areas can be resolved only through legislative action. The Every Student Counts Act is that legislative action.

THE EVERY STUDENT COUNTS ACT WOULD DO THE FOLLOWING

- Make high school graduation rate calculations uniform and accurate. The Every Student Counts Act would require that all states calculate their graduation rates in the same manner, allowing for more consistency and transparency.
- Set meaningful high school graduation rate goals and growth targets for all students. The Every Student Counts Act sets a graduation rate goal of 90 percent for all students and

disadvantaged populations. Schools, districts, and states with graduation rates below 90 percent, in the aggregate or for any different category of students, must increase their graduation rates an average of 3 percentage points per year to make AYP.

- Balance testing and high school graduation rates for accountability purposes. The Every Student Counts Act would ensure that test scores and graduation rates are both included as significant factors in determining AYP so that schools have balanced incentives to both graduate their students and raise their test scores instead of doing one at the expense of the other.

- A small number of students take longer than four years to graduate. Instead of treating certain students differently for accountability purposes and predetermining when certain students would graduate, the Every Student Counts Act includes a cumulative graduation rate provision. Under this provision, schools, school districts, and states would be given credit for graduating students who may take longer than the typical four years when they graduate with a regular diploma. Providing for a cumulative rate also provides incentives for schools, districts, and states to create programs to serve students who have already dropped out and are over-age or under credited. The bill also maintains the primacy of graduating all students in four years by requiring that at least 90 percent of all graduates be four-year graduates.

PROGRESS ON MAKING EVERY STUDENT COUNT AND INCREASING GRADUATION RATES

Support for improving graduation rates is growing. In September 2010, ED awarded 28 school districts and 1 state educational agency a total of nearly \$50 million in High School Graduation Initiative grants. The High School Graduation Initiative is a program that awards five-year-long competitive discretionary grants and was started, according to ED, to help implement dropout prevention, intervention and re-entry programs in high schools with annual dropout rates that exceed their state average annual dropout rate. In the Fiscal Year 2010 Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations bill, Congress – understanding the importance of targeting assistance to combat dropout factories and provide significant support for graduation rate initiatives that are critical to the nation's longer-term prosperity – appropriated \$50 million to fully fund the program. The program received a little less than \$50 in the Fiscal Year 2011 Continuing Resolution, which will be used to help the existing awardees maintain their initiatives.

During the 112th Congress, as we move closer to the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Every Student Counts Act and other initiatives such as Rep. Hinojosa's "Graduation Promise Act," Rep. Kildee's "Fast-Track to College Act," and Rep. Grijalva's "Success in the Middle Act," provide the legislative action needed to change the paradigm on accountability, make significant strides to reform dropout factories and increase graduation rates.

Additional Information

- [Read the bill](#)
- [Press Release Announcing Introduction](#)
- [Rep. Scott's Floor Statement on the Introduction of the Every Student Counts Act](#)
- [Richmond Times Dispatch Editorial - *Graduation Rates: No more drop outs - every student counts*](#)