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Public Education Policy And Progress



ANOTHER POSITIVE STEP FOR ESEA REAUTHORIZATION: Testifying Before Congress, Duncan Calls for Reauthorization in 2010, Receives Praise for Bipartisan Outreach

On February 18, key Democratic and Republican leaders of the House Education and Labor Committee [announced plans for a bipartisan reform](#) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In a March 3 hearing, the chairman and the top Republican on the House Education and Labor Committee both reiterated the goal of a bipartisan ESEA reauthorization in 2010 while praising **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** for his outreach to both parties and both chambers.

“It’s time to finally do something about the education crisis in this country that impacts our competitiveness and our position as a leader in a global economy,” said **Representative George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee**. “President Obama has set a critical goal of producing the most college graduates in the world by 2020. To get there, we will need to reform ESEA so that it fulfills its promise of an excellent education for every student that prepares them for the rigors of college and good jobs.”

Miller commended Duncan for spending time over the last several months meeting with both the Republican and Democratic leaders in the House and Senate as well as the chairs and top Republicans of the education committees in both chambers. He also made clear that the goal was to reauthorize ESEA in 2010.

Representative John Kline (R-MN), top Republican on the committee, echoed Miller’s statement and applauded the bipartisan approach to reauthorizing ESEA. “The fact that we’re working together in a bipartisan, bicameral way with the White House and with the department, starting with a blank piece of paper to see what we can do is absolutely the right process ... I applaud that and thank [Secretary Duncan] for it.”

Kline provided a brief outline of Republican priorities for a revised ESEA. Specifically, he listed restoring local control, empowering parents, letting teachers teach, and protecting taxpayers. Kline also expressed a concern that the federal government would be playing a role in the common core standards initiative.¹

¹ The common core standards initiative is a process in which the governors and chief state school officers of forty-eight states have come together to develop K–12 and college- and career-ready standards in math and English language arts to help ensure that students, regardless of where they live, are educated to meet the demands of college and the workplace.

“The idea that academic standards would have to be federally approved—either through participation in a government sanctioned set of common standards or direct consent by an unnamed federal entity—looks to many of us like national standards,” he said.

In response, both Miller and Duncan stressed that the effort was state-led and state-controlled. “If a governor doesn’t believe the common standards aren’t good for them, if he or she doesn’t want to take a shot at internationally benchmarked standards to measure their students and try to develop the curriculum and the achievement, then they’ll make that choice,” Miller said.

Duncan agreed. “If these are national standards, if these are federal standards, this thing dies,” he said. “They should always be driven at the local level. We should not be touching that. We should not be touching curriculum.”

In discussing the three core areas of the president’s Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 budget request for the U.S. Department of Education, Duncan first mentioned college- and career-ready standards, noting that the standards were “developed not by us but by states at the local level.” He also discussed the importance of supporting and rewarding excellence in the classroom and the value of a smarter and more targeted federal role that gives states and districts as much flexibility as possible while ensuring as much accountability as possible.

Turning to ESEA reauthorization, Duncan said that he “[loved] the sense of bipartisan commitment” to reauthorizing the law. He outlined some themes that were important to him in a reauthorization, specifically mentioning a greater focus on growth and gain—both in student achievement and high school graduation rates. He also would like to see more rewards for success. “Under the previous law, there are numerous ways to fail but very few rewards for success. We want to change that,” he said.

Calling teachers and principals the “real game changers” in education reform, Duncan spent a significant portion of his testimony on the administration’s teacher quality agenda. He pointed out that the FY 2011 budget includes a 10 percent increase to improve teacher quality but said that states and districts need to invest the money more effectively. He cited the need for school-based professional development that provides teachers and leaders with the support they need to succeed, evaluation systems that recognize great teachers and give teachers useful real-time feedback on how to improve, and time to collaborate so teachers can work together and improve their practice.

Duncan also talked about the importance of turning around our nation’s lowest-performing schools—roughly five thousand schools nationwide, including the two thousand high schools that produce about half of the nation’s dropouts. “Where things aren’t getting better and where we have dropout rates of 50, 60, 70 percent, we have to do something dramatically different and we’re putting our money where our mouth is ... to see us break through here,” he said.

To watch the complete video of the March 3 hearing and read opening statements from Miller or Duncan, go to <http://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/2010/03/building-a-stronger-economy-sp.shtml>.

Race to the Top Finalists Announced

On March 4, the U.S. Department of Education announced fifteen states and the District of Columbia as finalists in the first phase of the Race to the Top competition, a \$4.35 billion competitive grant program under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) that rewards states for undertaking significant K–12 education reforms designed to boost student achievement.

“These states are an example for the country of what is possible when adults come together to do the right thing for children,” said Education Secretary Arne Duncan. “Everyone that applied for Race to the Top is charting a path for education reform in America. I salute all of the applicants for their hard work. And I encourage nonfinalists to reapply for phase two.”

Phase one finalists are Colorado, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Finalists were chosen from an application pool that included forty states and the District of Columbia.

Finalists have been invited to come to Washington, DC in mid-March to present their proposals to the panel that reviewed their applications during the initial stage, and to engage in question-and-answer discussions. This interaction will allow reviewers to ensure that the state has the understanding, knowledge, capacity, and will to deliver on what it proposed. After the presentations, the reviewers will meet again to discuss each application, finalize scores and comments, and submit them to the department. Secretary Duncan will make the final selections.

“We are setting a high bar and we anticipate very few winners in phase one,” Duncan said. “But this isn’t just about the money. It’s about collaboration among all stakeholders, building a shared agenda, and challenging ourselves to improve the way our students learn. I feel that every state that has applied is a winner—and the biggest winners of all are the students.”

Winners will be announced in April. Applications for phase two are due on June 1. More information on the selection process is available at <http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2010/03/03042010.html>.



DON'T LEAVE ACCOUNTABILITY BEHIND: Joint Report from Alliance and NCLB Commission Argues for ESEA Reauthorization

A new report argues the promise of education reform efforts such as Race to the Top and the state-led common standards movement, can only be sustained if Congress and the Obama administration update and improve the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Released by the Alliance for Excellent Education and the [Aspen Institute's Commission on No Child Left Behind](#), the report, *Don't Leave Accountability Behind: A Call for ESEA Reauthorization*, credits Congress and the administration for encouraging states to advance important education priorities by linking the stimulus dollars in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to reform initiatives. However, the report argues that ARRA's one-time funding will run out soon and cannot address long-term needs.

“Sustaining and building on this reform momentum is critical to assuring that all kids—regardless of zip code—receive an excellent education that prepares them for success,” said **Gary Huggins, executive director of the Commission on No Child Left Behind**. “While the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act includes many critical reform elements that should be part of a reauthorized ESEA, it is not a substitute for the systemic, durable reform that only a reauthorization can provide.”

Since the last reauthorization in 2002, the report notes, the nation has benefited from NCLB's commitment to hold schools accountable for improving outcomes for all students by highlighting the achievement gaps among groups of students through annual assessments for every student (administered in grades 3–8 and once in high school), report cards for every school, and consequences for schools that do not meet expectations. On NCLB's watch, significant gains, particularly in elementary grades, were made over the last decade on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the only uniform test administered in every state. Unfortunately, gains on NAEP start declining in the nation's middle and high schools where achievement gaps remain large.

"NCLB was groundbreaking when it was signed into law," said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. "Almost ten years later it's a compact disc in an iPod world—useful, but in desperate need of an upgrade. By reauthorizing ESEA, the Congress can address the aspects of NCLB that time, experience, and research have shown need to be significantly improved and do more to help ensure that every student graduates from high school prepared for college and careers."

In an effort to provide temporary fixes to NCLB, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) created important pilot programs and offered waivers permitting school districts and states to experiment with different approaches to accountability and school improvement, the report notes. ARRA brought about even more rules and additional waivers.

"In the absence of ESEA reauthorization, the myriad guidelines, rules, and waivers that followed NCLB and ARRA have resulted in a patchwork quilt of requirements that send mixed signals to states and school districts," Huggins said. "There must be a clear and streamlined roadmap on how they all work together and more effectively support state and local reform efforts."

The report outlines four distinct reasons ESEA reauthorization is necessary to support long-term reform and ensure strong accountability for student outcomes and improvement:

- NCLB and ARRA have inconsistent accountability goals and measures that send mixed messages to educators and parents, and have the potential to confuse local administrators and increase bureaucracy at the state and federal levels. For example, NCLB set a goal of all students becoming proficient in math and reading by 2014. On the other hand, ARRA requires states to set goals that are "ambitious and achievable," but imposes no timelines.
- While ARRA's programs rightly prioritize the *lowest*-performing schools, too many other low-performing schools and students do not receive attention and support. Under the competitive framework of ARRA's Race to the Top Fund, not every state will receive funding and, in states that do, only a subset of eligible schools will benefit.
- Although there are multiple reporting requirements and administrative burdens, states are not necessarily held accountable for the efficient, effective, and equitable use of federal education dollars under Race to the Top. According to the report, ESEA reauthorization presents an opportunity to rethink and improve monitoring strategies to minimize the burden to states and districts, while maximizing accountability for results.

- The NCLB accountability framework needs to be updated to recognize the state-led movement toward higher, common standards and improved assessments while maintaining accountability for results. The report argues that an ESEA reauthorization is necessary to realign the accountability system accordingly, while simultaneously ensuring that all schools—including low-performing schools—are accurately identified for improvement and interventions.

In the report, the Commission on No Child Left Behind and the Alliance for Excellent Education call on the administration and Congress to move swiftly to reauthorize ESEA in 2010. Over the coming weeks, the Commission and the Alliance will be reaching out to other national organizations to add to the push for ESEA reauthorization this year.

The complete report is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/AllianceCommissionReport.pdf>.



CLOSING THE EXPECTATIONS GAP: A Measure of State Progress in Adopting College- and Career- Ready Policies

A new report from Achieve finds that states have made steady progress in implementing a college- and career-ready agenda in high schools but notes that few advancements have been made by states in adopting comprehensive accountability systems. According to *Closing the Expectations Gap*, Texas is the only state to have all five measures of college and career readiness in place, including high standards, graduation requirements, rigorous assessments, P–20 student tracking data, and strong accountability systems.

According to the report, thirty-one states have aligned their English and math high school standards with college and workplace expectations while almost half have graduation requirements that will prepare students for a successful postsecondary future. However, only fourteen states are administering high school assessments that the state’s postsecondary institutions use to make placement decisions or the business community uses for hiring decisions. Only a few more states (sixteen) have implemented longitudinal data systems that follow student achievement from the state’s K–12 systems to the state’s higher education systems.

Achieve used a four-point evaluation method to establish whether a state had a comprehensive accountability system in place. The four critical indicators were whether the state’s system tracked the percentage of high school graduates who (1) earned a college- and career-ready diploma, (2) obtained a readiness score on a college- and career-ready high school assessment, (3) earned college credit while still in high school, and (4) required remediation upon entering college. Texas was the only state to meet all of these requirements for an up-to-date, effective accountability system. However, as the chart to the right shows, many other states are on their way to developing solid accountability structures.

Tracking of College- and Career-Ready Indicators	
Indicators:	Number of states that include indicators in their data system
The percentage of high school students ...	
Earning a college- and career-ready diploma	15
Scoring college ready on a high school assessment	20
Earning college credit while in high school	19
Requiring remedial courses in college	22

Overall, nearly every state has made progress since 2005 when Achieve held a meeting with forty-five of the nation’s governors as well as business and education leaders from around the country. The summit spurred the formation of the American Diploma Project (ADP), a coalition that now includes thirty-five states committed to aligning high school curriculum with college and workforce demands. To monitor state progress on ADP’s goals, Achieve conducts this study on an annual basis and surveys K–12 education chiefs from all fifty states and the District of Columbia.

“What started off as isolated efforts among a few states five years ago has produced a national consensus: all students should receive a quality education that prepares them to succeed in college, career, and life,” said **Mike Cohen, president of Achieve**. “We applaud state leaders for spearheading what will benefit the future of our children and our nation.”

To read the full report, visit

<http://www.achieve.org/files/AchieveClosingtheExpectationsGap2010.pdf>.



GAINING GROUND IN THE MIDDLE GRADES: New EdSource Study Finds Higher-Performing Middle Schools Share Similar Practices

A new comprehensive study of California’s middle schools finds that higher-performing schools share common practices and philosophies, including a districtwide and schoolwide culture that is dedicated to academic improvements for all students and a clear and defined commitment to preparing all students for a challenging high school education.

The study, *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools Do Better*, argues that the “middle grades are the last best chance to identify students at risk of academic failure and get them back on track in time to succeed in high school” and that “success in key subjects in the middle grades is a strong predictor of success in high schools and beyond.”

Conducted by EdSource, a California-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to clarify complex education issues and to promote thoughtful policy decisions about public school improvement, the report seeks to determine why some middle schools outperform others on standards-based testing even though these middle schools serve a similar student population.

According to the report, higher-performing schools set measurable goals for student improvement, communicate with parents and students about the correlation between middle school performance and future goals, and link teacher evaluations to student outcomes. These schools also make it a priority to tie instruction, assessments, and curriculum to the state’s academic standards. This connection is reinforced by principals who ensure that English language arts (ELA) and math instruction are closely guided by state-adopted curriculum programs as well as through teachers who frequently collaborate to discuss curriculum, develop common benchmarks and assessments, and dissect the state content standards in order to identify prerequisite student skills.

Exceeding state and federal accountability targets is also a main concern for higher-performing schools. To that end, district leaders and educators at these schools use student assessment data to inform and improve instruction and learning strategies, and to set and modify goals for student achievement.

Another factor that distinguishes higher-performing schools from lower-performing schools is the active role that teachers play in engaging parents and encouraging them to shoulder the responsibility of their children's success. The higher-performing schools in the study also frequently took advantage of the required and voluntary student interventions to help all students stay on track and succeed.

“The results point to the importance of district and school educators working together in a full-court press that uses the many specific and actionable practices in this report,” said **Michael Kirst, professor emeritus and the study's principal investigator**. “The major contribution of this study is this interrelated set of practices that middle grades educators and leaders can implement now by making smart, strategic choices.”

Three hundred and three California middle schools participated in the study, including twenty-seven charters. Half of these schools serve predominantly low-income student populations and half serve predominantly middle-income populations. The report's researchers measured progress in student performance by analyzing the reported school and district practices against spring 2009 scores on California's standards-based tests in ELA, and math in grades six, seven, and eight.

The report's researchers surveyed a variety of educators across all levels including more than three hundred principals, 3,752 ELA and math teachers in grades 6–8, and 157 superintendents of the districts and charter management organizations that oversee the schools. The surveys included questions about more than nine hundred different actionable practices and policies with a focus on academic outcomes; standards-aligned instruction and learning; proactive academic interventions; teacher competencies, evaluation, and support; principal leadership; superintendent leadership and district support; school environment; organization of teaching and learning; and attention to student transfers.

To view the full report and additional resources, visit <http://www.edsource.org/middle-grades-study.html>.

Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both in Washington, DC and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America's six million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.