



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

Straight A's:

Public Education Policy and Progress

Volume 3, No. 7: April 14, 2003



THE TEACHING COMMISSION: Former IBM Chairman Establishes National Task Force On Teaching

Louis Gerstner, the former chairman of IBM, recently announced the creation of a national task force that will focus on improving the quality of teaching in America's schools. The commission reads like a "Who's Who" in the worlds of education reform and business, and includes former-first lady Barbara Bush, former governors James B. Hunt of North Carolina and Roy E. Barnes of Georgia, former U.S. Department of Education Secretary Richard W. Riley, and chief executives Kenneth L. Chenault of American Express and Philip M. Condit of Boeing. It will closely examine all aspects of teacher quality, including recruitment, retention, training, preparation, compensation, and evaluation.

The Teaching Commission will begin its work by studying current research, both inside and outside of the United States. Then it will use this body of knowledge as a foundation to make concrete policy recommendations within the next year. The Commission will focus on getting these recommendations implemented at the federal, state, and local levels. To this end, Gerstner has "packed the panel with people chosen as much for their political insight as their education expertise," says the *New York Times*.

In an op-ed for *USA Today*, Gerstner underscores the importance of great teachers in raising the achievement of students:

Teaching is a profession, so we have to get serious about treating it like one. That means competitive salaries, pay tied to performance and pay for expertise. It means we recruit the best talent—and keep it. We provide our teachers with assets taken for granted in other professions: high-quality teaching materials, tools and professional development.

Gerstner has pledged that this task force will not become another think tank, but will "create an agenda for action and change." Judging by the makeup of the task force, it shouldn't have any trouble generating press coverage. But as to the larger question of whether it can gain national support for real solutions, only time will tell.

Learn more about The Teaching Commission at:
<http://www.theteachingcommission.org/>



HIGH-POVERTY DISTRICTS IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT BY FOCUSING ON QUALITY OF TEACHING

A recent report highlights improvements in student achievement made by five high-poverty school districts through a focus on improved teaching. The report, *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools* issued by the **Learning First Alliance**, examines districts that draw at least 38 percent of their students from poor families, and have shown three or more years of improvement in test scores across subjects, grade levels, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. (The report is available at: <http://www.learningfirst.org/bie/bie.html>).

The report identified characteristics that are common to a number of districts in order to suggest which spending might have the largest payoff in student achievement. It found that several districts overhauled their curricula to better align it with state academic standards and modified professional development to support new academic goals. As a result, districts eliminated one-shot teacher workshops and instead chose to focus on nurturing in-house teaching experts, supporting new teachers, and encouraging educators at every level to use data to guide instruction. They also committed themselves to sustaining reform over the long haul.

Researchers were also able to identify obstacles that limited district and school success. One common problem was too little time for teacher collaboration: “While many schools increased the amount of collaborative time available, carving out an hour or two a week for reflection, only a limited number significantly overhauled the school day,” according to the report. As a result, in many schools, teachers felt overwhelmed by the additional demands and new expectations placed on them. An additional problem was a district dependence on external and short-term funding from the state and federal government that often could not be sustained.

Tax Credits for Teachers: Why Not?

Recently introduced by **U.S. Reps. Heather Wilson (R-NM)** and **U.S. Rep. Max Sandlin (D-TX)**, H.R. 1643 [the *Low-income Educator Assistance and Relief Now (LEARN) Act*], would help hard-to-staff schools in both rural and urban areas attract and retain high-quality teachers. According to initial estimates by the National Education Association, approximately 800,000 educators would benefit from this tax credit each year, a total financial benefit of about \$1.4 to \$1.5 billion annually.

The LEARN Act has 31 original cosponsors from both political parties. If enacted, it would provide a \$2,000 tax credit to any teacher or principal who teaches in a Title I eligible school (a school with at least 40 percent of its students from families in poverty).

On the other side of Capitol Hill, **Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-WV)** reintroduced a bill that would offer tax credits to teachers in hard-to-staff schools and to those who obtain national certification. The bill, the Incentives to Educate American Children Act of 2003 (I TEACH), promises a \$1,000 tax credit to teachers who work in rural or low-income schools, and an additional \$1,000 tax credit for those who earn a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification. To earn such a distinction, teachers must have a bachelor’s degree, three years of classroom experience, and must pass a written exam.



PINK SLIPS AND RECRUITMENT: NCLB-Mandates and State Budget Shortfalls Cause Havoc in the Hiring and Firing Process

Over the last few weeks, the difficulties of meeting the *No Child Left Behind*-mandate to place a high-quality teacher in every classroom by the 2004-2005 have become more evident to school districts across the country. From California to New York, states are struggling to balance their budgets without firing qualified teachers while simultaneously trying to lure highly qualified teachers, especially in math, science, and special education.

Realizing that the state will have to make deep cuts in education spending to close its projected \$35 billion budget deficit, California school administrators last month notified approximately 20,000 primary and secondary school teachers (20 percent of the total workforce) that they might be out of work after this school year. The state has yet to give school districts any inkling of how much their budgets might be cut. Consequently, class sizes, which were successfully reduced during the economic boom of the 1990s to as low as 20 per class, are now very likely to grow, with some scenarios suggesting as many as 40 students per class.

In Los Angeles, rather than implementing lower class sizes across-the-board, district officials are focusing on specific grade levels and overcrowded classes in core subjects. A year ago, the school board voted to increase class size by an average of two students in order to save \$65.6 million. Now some classes which previously had 32 to 34 students have between 32 and 38 students.

On the other side of the country, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said earlier this month that he planned to lay off over 3,000 school employees. While the plan is not likely to affect teachers, it will mean the release of many teacher's aides. The layoffs are expected to save about \$180 million, or about 3.5 percent of the budget, according to the *New York Times*. In related news, the city announced that the four-year graduation rate for the Class of 2002 slipped to 50 percent, down 1 percent from the previous year.

Later the same day, New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein announced two new programs to recruit new teachers to the city's classrooms and to convince former teachers to return. The efforts will focus on math, science, and special education teachers in order to fill the expected need for 11,000 fully licensed teachers at the start of the next school year.

Palm Beach County Schools Streamline Certification Process for Math and Science Teachers

Because of growing enrollment, as well as a voter-approved constitutional amendment to reduce class size, Florida is expected to hire 22,000 teachers by August. Palm Beach County schools alone will have to hire about 1,400 new teachers to keep up with enrollment growth, and an additional 600 to meet the class-size requirement. This demand, along with an acute shortage of math and science teachers, has forced many districts to consider nontraditional methods that lead to teacher certification. In Palm

Pink Slips and Recruitment

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Beach County, school officials have started an online fast-track teacher certification program, according to the *Palm Beach Post*. The program is meant for second-career professionals who want to move into the teaching field.

Previously, a person without a teaching certification had to earn 20 college credits and pass a state teaching exam in order to teach. Under the new program, participants complete online reading assignments and are assigned a mentor to help with classroom management and lesson planning. They must also pass the state teaching exam. This whole process is designed to take one year. Only about 20 teachers in three middle schools are currently enrolled in the program, but enrollment is expected to grow as the program expands.

Meanwhile, another teacher recruitment initiative underway in Palm Beach County has not been as successful as school officials had hoped. Last year, the school district offered a \$10,000 bonus to lure the area's top teachers into F-rated schools. (Although it was advertised as a \$10,000 bonus, \$2,500 of the total was contingent on the teacher significantly raising student achievement). This year, the district stuck with the incentive and sent letters to 86 teachers, asking them to make the switch. As of April 4, only five had agreed to do so.

Interviews with eligible teachers indicate that considerations other than pay prevented many teachers from transferring. Some eligible teachers told the *South Florida Sun Sentinel* that they were reluctant because they were unfamiliar with the principal at the new school, or because they would face a much longer commute. Others turned down the proposal because they were only given a few days to make such an important decision and could not leave because of the strong loyalty they felt to their current school. For those who have agreed to transfer, the most attractive incentive, other than the bonus, is the challenge of teaching in such a difficult environment.

Pennsylvania Plan Would Restructure Teacher Payment Scale

In Pennsylvania, Gov. Ed Rendell has developed a new method to reward excellent teachers that would include performance bonuses as teachers move up a new career ladder. The plan is part of Rendell's \$1.25 billion school reform proposal and proposes shrinking the current 16-step salary scale for teachers to six steps.

The new career ladder would include six rungs, ranging from a non-tenured level for beginning teachers to the highest level, national board certification. National board certification requires up to 400 hours of preparation and course work. Currently only about 80 teachers in Pennsylvania hold a national certification, compared to over 5,000 in North Carolina. Individual teacher unions and school boards will work out their own contracts and salary amounts for each rung.



SMALL CLASS SIZE INITIATIVES UNDERWAY IN BALTIMORE: Smaller Classes Mean More Personal Relationships Between Teachers and Students, Higher Achievement

The March 2003 issue of *Urban Educator*, the **Council of Great City Schools' (CGCS)** newsletter, describes the success that high schools in Baltimore, MD, had in raising student achievement by redesigning nine high schools into smaller learning communities.

In October 2001, **Baltimore Schools Chief Executive Carmen Russo** began the initiative to break-up the city's high schools. Before the change, the city's high schools had an average enrollment of 1,600, were plagued by high rates of absenteeism, and had a dropout rate of more than 70 percent.

While schools such as Samuel Banks High School have, thus far, seen only small gains in academics, greater progress has been made in discipline and teacher morale. According to principal Jimmie Jones, "Students trust the teachers and teachers are able to manage the classrooms better." Small schools also allow teachers and principals to develop personal relationships with students and make the students feel more nurtured.

Similar programs are also underway in several other urban districts throughout the country, including Chicago; Denver; Indianapolis; Minneapolis; Philadelphia; San Francisco; and Sacramento, CA. According to a recent report by the U.S. Department of Education and the CGCS, *Great Expectation: Reforming Urban High Schools*, high schools can improve academic performance by creating smaller learning communities "in which students and teachers feel more connected to the school."

Read the complete article in *Urban Educator* at:

http://www.cgcs.org/urbaneducator/2003/mar_vol_12_no_2_10/mar_vol_12_no_2_10.html

Smaller Learning Communities Underway in Carroll County, Maryland

In Carroll County, MD, an initiative to make high school more personal and relevant is underway thanks to a \$2.3 million federal grant to carve smaller learning communities out of the more traditional, larger high schools. In addition, Carroll County has developed a program in all seven of its high schools in which a teacher meets every few weeks with a group of about 20 students. The teacher acts as an adviser to the same group of students for all four years of their high school career.

The teacher adviser program is similar to that proposal in the Alliance for Excellent Education's College Preparation Initiative, outlined in *Every Child a Graduate*. In the report, the Alliance recommends a student support coordinator who works with students to help them develop a clear plan that will place them on a path to earning their degree. The coordinator not only assesses a student's needs and helps to map out rigorous course work, he or she also identifies additional learning opportunities (e.g., tutoring), and necessary health and social services that might be necessary to ensure success.

Other initiatives underway in Carroll County schools include career academies that have been introduced at the area's two new public high schools, Century High and Winters Mill High. According to *The Baltimore Sun*, these academies are "similar to small colleges within a university that are based on broad career interests and that keep students with the same coterie of students and teachers over a period of years." Other high schools have developed freshman seminar courses that help ninth-graders make the transition from middle school to high school.

Read more about the program in *The Baltimore Sun* at:

<http://www.sunspot.net/news/education/bal-ca.schools09apr09,0,2118047.story?coll=bal%2Deducation%2Dk12>



CONGRESS PASSES BUDGET RESOLUTION: Senate \$8.2 Billion Increased Investment for Education Dropped to \$3 Billion

Last week, House and Senate conferees reached an agreement on the 2004 congressional budget resolution before leaving town for a two-week district work period. While the final version includes an increase of approximately \$3 billion over fiscal 2003 levels for education programs, it is likely to come at the expense of other education programs and is over \$4 billion less than the Senate-passed level.

The budget resolution claims to increase education spending by \$3 billion, the plan calls for increases in Title I (\$1 billion), special education (\$2.2 billion), Impact Aid (\$50 million), and Pell Grants (\$1.3 billion), for a total of over \$4.5 billion. It includes an unspecified cut of \$7.6 billion to other domestic spending which the Appropriations committee could use in part to pay for the increases for education. Without that cut, the education increases may not be provided.

The final budget resolution does not, however, include the House-backed plan to cut \$9.7 billion in mandatory education spending. Such a cut would have come from student loans and free and reduced price school lunches for poor students. In the end, the final decision on line-by-line assumptions for individual education programs will be left to members of the appropriations committees.

Although the budget includes an increase of \$1 billion for Title I under *No Child Left Behind*, the plan still falls over \$6 billion below the amount to which Congress committed when the bill was signed into law. Not only does this amount fall below the authorized level for younger students, it does not include the amount needed now to help high school students meet higher standards, pass exit exams, and graduate from high school.

Even though education was one of the most important issues in the House-Senate conference, it paled in comparison to the debate on the size of the tax cut. The final agreement allows each of the two tax committees to draft bills that cut taxes by as much as \$550 billion over 10 years. However, according to *CQ Weekly*, “any bill larger than \$350 billion could be killed on the Senate floor by a new point of order that would require 60 votes to waive—effectively making that the threshold during the initial debate on the Senate floor.” It continues, “But the proposed arrangement would permit negotiators to return a bill of up to the full \$550 billion, with the resulting conference report passable with only simple majorities in both chambers.”

With **Sen. Zell Miller (D-GA)** as the sole Democrat publicly supporting the president’s tax plan, Republicans can only afford to lose one senator from their party. Currently, **Sens. Olympia Snowe (R-ME)** and **George Voinovich (R-OH)** have pledged to reject any tax cut plan that would exceed the \$350 billion that the Senate passed in its budget plan. Additionally, **Sens. John McCain (R-AZ)** and **Lincoln Chafee (R-RI)** are opposed to any tax cuts at this time. Republican leaders are hopeful that a victory in the war against Iraq will have strengthened President Bush’s position on a larger tax cut

when the vote comes up later in the year. However, many Democrats and advocates for domestic priorities are hopeful that the tax cut will go no higher than \$350 billion.

Because they fall under the jurisdiction of two separate committees, the level of the tax cut does not necessarily affect this year's final appropriation for education. However, the long-term effect of a large tax cut that would affect spending decisions for the next ten years would greatly affect the ability of Congress to make substantial investments in education.



LOW-INCOME STUDENTS MISSING ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES: New Study Identifies the True University Minority

The debate over the fairness of affirmative action admission policies is back in the spotlight thanks to the Supreme Court case challenging the University of Michigan's policies. A new report released by **The Century Foundation**, "*Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions*," adds a new dimension to this classic discussion. The report addresses the question: Should low-income students, who constitute an even greater minority than racial groups, benefit from affirmative action? Authors **Anthony P. Carnevale** of **Educational Testing Service** and **Stephen J. Rose** of **ORC Macro International** conclude that they should.

In 1995, African-Americans and Latinos only constituted 12 percent of the freshman class, even though they accounted for 28 percent of all 18 year olds in the general population. That same year, low-income students made up an even smaller percentage of the freshman class; ten percent of incoming students came from the bottom 50 percent of the socioeconomic scale and only 3 percent from the bottom 25 percent.

The report found that low-income students do not benefit from the advantages of attending a selective college, which the authors define as a greater likelihood of graduating; greater access to graduate schools; and a potential for a higher salary in the job market. If current policies continue, the number of low-income students in college is not expected to increase, as most top colleges do not have plans for identifying and admitting qualified low-income students. In fact, recruiting efforts that target these students have declined over the past decade.

Carnevale and Rose recommend the expansion of current affirmative action programs to include low-income students because they can add both economic and racial diversity on college campuses.

Read the full report at: <http://www.tcf.org/Publications/Detail.asp?ItemID=217>

Straight A's: An Update on Public Education is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both in Washington, D.C., 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 non-profit organization working to make it possible for America's 6 million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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