



StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



EDUCATION SECRETARY OUTLINES OBAMA EDUCATION AGENDA: In Appearance Before House Committee, Duncan Stresses Reform Component of Stimulus Bill, Need to Improve High Schools

On May 20, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** appeared before the House Committee on Education and Labor to discuss President Obama's education agenda. During the hearing, Secretary Duncan, as well as several committee members, expressed an urgency around the need to turn around the nation's lowest-performing schools, especially the so-called "dropout factories" that account for 50 percent of the nation's dropouts.

During his testimony, Duncan highlighted the \$1.5 billion that the president's Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 budget would provide for the School Improvement program as a "vital" program for helping states and districts address problems in the most-troubled schools. Combined with the \$3 billion it received in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and the \$545 million it received in FY 2009, the School Improvement program would have more than \$5 billion to turn around the lowest-performing schools. Given those resources, Duncan set a goal of turning around one thousand low-performing schools each year for the next five years.

Duncan focused specifically on the approximately two thousand high schools that produce 50 percent of the nation's dropouts and 75 percent of minority dropouts. He sees these schools as a real challenge, but also a real opportunity given the resources available to work with these dropout factories, as well as the middle and elementary schools that feed into them. "Everyone in this room knows that when children drop out today, they are basically condemned to poverty and social failure," he said. "There are no good jobs out there for high school dropouts. We have to act now to make sure that we do something better for those children and communities."

Another topic was the president's proposal to expand the Striving Readers program from a \$35 million program focused on middle and high schools to a more comprehensive \$370 million program that would address the reading needs of children in elementary schools as well. "The program will take a comprehensive approach to reading instruction, ensuring that students develop the basic skills as well as the reading comprehension that is so vital to their success in high school and beyond," Duncan said.

After Duncan's testimony, **House Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA)** commended him for his focus on changing the nation's high schools. Miller noted that the high school initiatives that have been proposed in the committee have been bipartisan, adding that the committee is "ready to move to make the changes that are necessary so that we can effectively change the outcomes for these students and the performance of these schools."

Earlier in the hearing, Miller praised Obama for recognizing the important role that education can play in getting the nation's economy back on track. Miller pointed to the \$100 billion in education funding included in the ARRA as evidence of Obama's commitment to "making education a part of [the] recovery" and seriousness about driving reforms in education. "This investment gives us an opportunity to lay the groundwork for reforms that will be essential to any larger effort to improve our schools," Miller said. "The plan also gives Secretary Duncan the tools to fuel innovative reforms in schools through his unprecedented Race to the Top Fund."

Duncan agreed that ARRA funds will help the economy in the short term, and stressed that he expects states and districts to take "bold actions" that will lead directly to an improvement in student learning. He said that the reforms efforts driven by these funds will be the key to the nation's long-term economic success.

"I want local leaders to find change agents who can fix these schools," Duncan said. "I want them to provide incentives for their best teachers to take on the challenge of teaching in these schools. And where appropriate, I want them to create partnerships with charter school operators with a track record of success. I want superintendents to be aggressive in taking the difficult step of shutting down a failing school and replacing it with one they know will work."

The secretary also discussed the four commitments, or assurances, that states must make to receive funding under the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF), adding that he will be "scrutinizing" how states spend SFSF money to make sure they are focused on education.¹

"I have heard that some states plan to use their stabilization money so as to maintain their rainy day fund and that others may rely on their stabilization grants to pay for tax cuts instead of investing in reforms," Duncan said. "Let me be clear. I will do everything in my power to reject any schemes that would subvert the intended purpose of the Recovery Act, which is to help schools through the economic downturn and push reform, thereby ensuring our economic prosperity in the future."

Representative Buck McKeon (R-CA), the top Republican on the committee, outlined the areas where he thought Republicans could work with the Obama administration. Specifically, he cited support for charter schools and expanding pay-for-performance systems for teachers and principals. He also pointed out potential stumbling blocks, including the decision to end the Federal Family Education Loan program and the Opportunity Scholarship Program that provides vouchers to low-income students in Washington, DC.

Video of the entire hearing and a transcript of Secretary Duncan's testimony are available at <http://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/2009/05/the-obama-administrations-educ.shtml>.

¹ To receive SFSF money, a state must first submit an application to the U.S. Department of Education providing assurances that it is committed to advancing education reform in the four specific areas mentioned in the ARRA: 1) making improvements in teacher effectiveness and ensuring that all schools have highly qualified teachers; 2) making progress toward college- and career-ready standards and rigorous assessments that will improve both teaching and learning; 3) improving achievement in low-performing schools by providing intensive support and effective interventions in schools that need them the most; and 4) gathering information to improve student learning, teacher performance, and college and career readiness through enhanced data systems that track progress.



A CRITICAL MISSION: SREB Report Urges States to Develop Comprehensive Adolescent Literacy Policies that Can Improve Reading and Writing in Secondary Schools

Improving middle and high school students' reading comprehension skills is the most important action states and schools can take to improve achievement in all subjects. So says, *A Critical Mission: Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States*, a new report from the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), which urges states to develop comprehensive adolescent literacy policies that can improve reading and writing in secondary schools.²

“We can’t expect to see achievement rise in math, science, and other subjects unless students can read, write, and communicate at more advanced levels,” said **Virginia Governor Tim Kaine (D), the chair of the SREB**. “Our nation’s economic prosperity depends on our making progress in education.”

According to the report, public schools generally do not teach reading after the elementary grades. And, unlike speaking skills, students generally do not develop the advanced reading skills on their own. As a result, far too many adolescents cannot read well enough to succeed in school and future careers while other students have not been challenged to develop the levels of literacy they will need to succeed in college and career training. It notes that while some SREB states are among the nation’s leaders in improving students’ reading achievement in the early grades, SREB states, and the nation as a whole, have made little improvement with students in middle and high schools.

None of the SREB member states has included reading in their academic standards for each of the subjects in high school. Because of this, few teachers have been asked to teach the reading skills that students need in each subject. According to the report, some teachers in various subjects have resisted efforts to incorporate reading instruction into their courses for fear that they will be asked to become “reading teachers.” But, the report notes that asking a teacher to become a reading teacher is “distinctly different” from asking a teacher to “*help students master texts within the teacher’s own field.*” It argues that subject-area teachers should not be expected to teach basic reading skills, but they can help students develop critical strategies and skills for reading texts in each subject.

The report finds that the impact of low literacy levels is far-reaching, for both individuals and states. For example, strong reading skills help adults engage more in their communities, assist their own children as learners, manage family responsibilities, and access information. For states, poor literacy levels translate into a workforce that increasingly will not compete effectively in the global economy.

In addition, states will be unlikely to raise high school and college graduation rates unless they help more students learn to read at higher levels. According to the report, students who leave eighth grade with weak reading skills quickly fall behind in high school. “More students in

² SREB was created by southern governors and legislatures in 1948 to help leaders in education and government work cooperatively to advance education and improve the social and economic life of the region. Its member states include Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

SREB states repeat ninth grade than any other grade, swelling ninth-grade enrollment by 14 percent in the SREB media states in 2005,” the report notes. “Students who falter in ninth grade are likely to become high school dropouts.” At the college level, one in four freshmen must take remedial reading classes—and few of those students earn a degree, the report finds.

Kaine led the SREB Committee to Improve Reading and Writing in Middle and High Schools, which included some of the nation’s most prominent researchers and policy experts in literacy. The committee’s recommendations to states on how to improve reading among older students served as the basis of the report. Its six recommendations are as follows:

- Develop statewide policies that establish improvement in reading as the top priority in all public middle grades and high schools.
- Identify the specific reading skills students need to improve their achievement in key academic subjects.
- Change the curricula to include the reading skills identified as crucial for students in each subject.
- Help teachers share subject-specific reading strategies with students.
- Assist struggling readers so that those who are behind can catch up before they become likely high school dropouts.
- Call for state education agencies to work with local school systems across the region to make sure these changes begin to take place and that every educator knows higher reading skills are the top priority in public education.

The complete report is available at

http://www.sreb.org/publications/2009/09E01_Critical_Mission_Reading_.pdf.



STATE ACTIONS TO IMPROVE ADOLESCENT LITERACY: NASBE Report Says that Addressing the “Pervasive” Low Level of Adolescent Literacy Will Take a Concerted Statewide Policy and School Improvement Effort

A new report from the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) argues that state education leaders are “painfully aware” of the low literacy levels among large numbers of adolescents, but these leaders have experienced difficulty framing an organized response to the crisis because states and districts generally lack systemic strategies for scaling up literacy instruction as part of subject-matter learning. However, the report, *State Actions to Improve Adolescent Literacy: Results from NASBE’s State Adolescent Literacy Network*, finds that when state leaders have the opportunity to focus their efforts and collaborate with key stakeholder groups, large-scale progress can be made.

“The role of the state in bringing to scale effective literacy instruction as part of content area learning is critical,” said **Mariana Haynes, NASBE’s director of policy research**. “States need to implement strategic literacy plans that are woven into their overall vision for preparing students for a global, knowledge-based economy.”

The report notes that many states have not developed the coherent policies and structures needed to support, scale up, and sustain high-quality literacy instruction through the K–12 system. It notes that there are several reasons behind the lack of literacy instruction, but it underscores that

having such instruction “necessitates having well-prepared teachers who have adequate knowledge of language and reading psychology and who can manage reading programs based on assessments of individual students’ needs.”

According to the report, the preparation of middle and high school teachers “generally focuses on content knowledge related to a teacher’s specific discipline and, at best, requires only a single generic course in reading to meet the state licensure requirements.” As a result, many teachers are not prepared to teach reading. “Without paying attention to the quality of the teaching profession and building the capacity to provide literacy instruction within content area classes, efforts to strengthen public education will continue to stall,” the report reads.

The report also argues that addressing the “pervasive” low level of adolescent literacy throughout the nation cannot be solved with extra tutoring or supplementary programs for those unable to read. Instead, it will take a concerted statewide policy and school improvement effort to “reach deep into districts to impact the instructional practices of teachers across the curriculum.”

The report is based on the lessons NASBE learned in eighteen months of work with the five states—Connecticut, Kentucky, New Hampshire, Utah, and West Virginia—that formed the State Adolescent Literacy Network. During this time, the network was remarkably successful in building state policy frameworks and capacity to improve adolescent literacy. The report identifies four key elements that the states adopted to drive improvements in literacy instruction and performance:

- adopting comprehensive literacy plans that connect reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking while integrating literacy instruction within subject areas;
- strengthening teacher licensure and preparation of teachers to provide research-based reading and writing throughout the curriculum;
- developing a continuum of supports and interventions for struggling readers; and
- designing policy structures and supports to drive local implementation of district- and school-wide literacy plans.

Even with these successes, NASBE acknowledges that much more work remains to be done. Moving forward, the report addresses two systems over which states exercise jurisdiction—the institutions for training educators and the accountability and assessment systems that measure school performance. It argues that states must foster partnerships with universities and districts in order to redesign teacher preparation and professional development to improve content-area literacy instruction by “grounding preparation in actual school settings and as a part of a community of practice; merging expertise within the colleges and among school, district and university staff; and providing strong clinical components.”

States must also rethink the design of accountability and assessment systems that drive what students learn and how teachers teach. In discussing the move toward higher, clearer standards, the report notes that the highest-performing nations create standards, curriculum guidance, and assessments that focus on twenty-first-century skills such as the abilities to find and organize information, communicate well in multiple formats, analyze and synthesize information, and self-monitor one’s understanding.

The complete report is available at <http://nasbe.org/index.php/file-repository?func=startdown&id=888>.

Report Examines Five (More) States' Efforts to Improve Adolescent Literacy

Five States' Efforts to Improve Adolescent Literacy is a new report prepared for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) by the Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands that examines what Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Rhode Island did to promote effective adolescent literacy practices in schools and districts.

The report looks at how each state engaged key stakeholders, set rigorous goals and standards, aligned resources to support adolescent literacy goals, built educator capacity, and used data to measure progress. It also includes a case study for each state showing how state educators and policymakers tailored their policy strategies to the state's needs.

Five States' Efforts highlights common challenges and insights into how states used five strategies to support their adolescent literacy improvement policies. Specifically, it examines how each state 1) engaged key stakeholders to make adolescent literacy a priority; 2) set rigorous state literacy goals and standards, with other state policies aligned to support them; 3) aligned resources to support adolescent literacy goals; 4) built educator capacity to support adolescent literacy programs at state, school, and classroom levels; and 5) measured progress and used data to make decisions and provide oversight.

In addition to these challenges, representatives from each state offered two more—providing content-area instruction to support both literacy skills and content-area competencies, and scaling up adolescent literacy policies. According to the report, all five states incorporated content-area literacy into their adolescent literacy programs and content-area teachers received professional development in content-area literacy in their state. States had various strategies for scaling up adolescent literacy initiatives; Alabama, Kentucky, and New Jersey supported adolescent literacy through small-scale programs or pilots, while Florida and Rhode Island put their adolescent literacy policies into practice statewide.

The report also offers questions for further research that state policymakers need answered. Some examples include: How can reading coaches or literacy specialists best support adolescent readers?; What are the best ways to integrate reading instruction into content-area instruction?; What assessments best meet secondary teachers' and secondary students' needs?; and What are the best ways of preparing and supporting teachers to meet the needs of struggling adolescent readers?

The complete report is available at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2009067.pdf.



LOST OPPORTUNITY: New Report Finds that Minority and Low-Income Students Have Only Half the Opportunity to Learn in the Nation's Public Schools as Their White Peers

Nearly 85 percent of states fail to provide students access to a moderately proficient public education system according to *Lost Opportunity: A 50 State Report on the Opportunity to Learn in America*, a new report by the Schott Foundation for Public Education. The report also finds that minority and low-income students have only half the opportunity to learn in public schools as do their white non-Latino peers.

“Under our current system, access to some of our nation’s districts or schools brings with it the virtual certainty of high school graduation and access to and success in postsecondary education,” the report reads. “Access to other districts or schools within the same states, however, brings near certainty of an education that ends well short of a high school diploma,

with little prospect for college or employment with livable wages and the near certain perpetuation of inter-generational poverty.”

To determine both the quality of and access to instruction, the Schott Foundation for Public Education analyzed student performance data reported by state departments of education in all fifty states and the District of Columbia. It then calculated an initial resource access score, called the “Opportunity to Learn Index (OTLI),” which compares the opportunity of students from disadvantaged groups to have access to the 25 percent of the schools in a state where nearly all students graduate on time and college ready to that of white, non-Latino students. For example, if 40 percent of a state’s white, non-Latino students are enrolled in the top quartile of that state’s schools, and 20 percent of students from disadvantaged groups are given the opportunity to study in such schools, the OTLI is 50 percent: disadvantaged students have half the “Opportunity to Learn” as white, non-Latino students in that state.

The eight states that provide the greatest opportunity for minority and low-income students to learn are Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire, Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Virginia. Alternatively, sixteen states provide access to good public schools to some of their students, the report finds, but they “essentially restrict” minority and low-income students to schools where they have little opportunity to learn. Another nine states and the District of Columbia provide neither a moderately proficient school system nor equitable access to the system’s best schools or resources.

Lost Opportunity also finds that fewer than 20 percent of students from historically disadvantaged groups are enrolled in the top quarter of high schools in each state, compared to 35 percent of Asian American students and 32 percent of white students. Meanwhile, African American (42 percent), Latino (35 percent), low-income (34 percent), Native American (32 percent), and Asian American (21 percent) students are more likely than white students (15 percent) to attend schools where they have little chance of demonstrating academic proficiency, graduating from high school, and attaining the postsecondary credentials that are essential in today’s economy.

To help combat this inequality, the report calls on the federal government to “develop and implement a national opportunity-to-learn resource accountability system to track student access to core educational resources.” To support this system, the report makes several recommendations, including that the federal government and community advocates take steps to use data systems to ensure that states and localities are achieving the highest return on investments from taxpayer dollars, and that President Obama immediately establishes a National Interagency Commission on the Opportunity to Learn to determine the necessary sustained investments, coordination, and partnerships to ensure that students in all states have a fair and substantive opportunity to learn by 2020.

The complete report is available at <http://www.schottfoundation.org/>.

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.