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## **KING FOR A DAY: Acting Education Secretary Shares Personal Passion for Education, Thoughts on ESSA Implementation During Senate Education Committee Confirmation Hearing**

If his February 25 confirmation hearing before the Senate education committee, which was called “collegial” by the [Washington Post](#) and [Education Week](#), is any indication, **Acting U.S. Secretary of Education John King** should receive a favorable recommendation when the committee meets to vote on his nomination on March 9. After that vote occurs, it is uncertain when the full Senate will consider King’s confirmation.

At the start of the hearing, **U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN)** said that he urged President Obama to officially nominate King for the position of education secretary—rather than having him remain “active” secretary—when he and other members of Congress went to the White House for the December 10 signing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

“I did that because this is such an important year for our nation’s schools,” Alexander said. “We need an education secretary who is confirmed and accountable to Congress while we’re implementing a law that may govern elementary and secondary education for years to come. I want to be sure that we are working together to implement the law as Congress wrote it.”

It was that notion of congressional intent around ESSA that Alexander came back to several times during the hearing. He stressed that ESSA restores the responsibility for students’ success to states, school districts, and classroom teachers and “reverses the trend toward ... a national school board” in which governors, under NCLB waivers, were “forced to go to Washington and play ‘Mother, May I’ in order to put in a plan to evaluate teachers or help a low-performing school.”

Alexander called ESSA an “important change in direction,” “excellent policy,” and something that should provide a “much-needed period of stability for federal policy in schools for several years,” but he cautioned that the law is “not worth the paper it is printed on unless it is implemented the way Congress wrote it.”

During his [testimony](#), King agreed with the shift toward local control, adding, “as a former teacher, principal, and state commissioner, I know from personal experience that the best ideas come from classrooms not from conference rooms.” At the same time, however, King noted that ESSA “preserves the critical federal role to ensure guardrails to protect civil rights.”

Throughout his testimony, King kept a laser-like focus on the issue of equity that was informed by his professional and personal experiences.

King presented himself as proof that education is the “difference between hope and despair and between life and death.” The son of two life-long New York City public educators, King lost his mother to a heart attack when he was eight and his father just four years later.

“Amidst that trauma and uncertainty, school was my refuge, and teachers were my saviors,” King said. “And it’s because there are so many young people out there like me that I feel such urgency about the work of education.”

King outlined several “meaningful, positive steps” that the U.S. education system has made, including achieving the highest high school graduation rate ever, cutting the number of “dropout factory” high schools in half, granting tens of thousands of children access to high-quality preschool, and providing millions more students with access to higher education. He also listed areas where more work remains.

“For all our progress, students of color, low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities, still lag behind their peers and nearly every important measure of school achievement,” King said. “And in far too many schools, we still offer them less—less access to the best teachers and the most challenging courses, less access to the resources necessary to thrive.”

King was pressed by **Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT)** during the question-and-answer portion of the hearing on how he would protect these subgroups of students under a law that grants states a great deal of flexibility to create their own accountability systems and interventions associated with them. King responded that states “have an opportunity to use their flexibility around interventions to increase equity ... but [that] it will also be important for the department to be vigilant after that first set of interventions is put in place .... If they aren’t working, if they aren’t closing achievement gaps, if they aren’t raising graduation rates...states [need] to intensify those interventions.” King added that the U.S. Department of Education would be “very careful” in its work to issue regulations, guidance, and technical assistance in this area, which would be guided by feedback from stakeholders.

King received praise from senators throughout the hearing. Alexander noted that he had “seen [the U.S.] education system from nearly every angle” as a public school student, teacher, charter school founder, education commissioner in New York, and father. **Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), the committee’s top Democrat**, said King has “spent his career fighting on behalf of students so they get the chance to learn, grow, and thrive in the classroom and beyond. No one can question his passion for our nation’s young people.”

Video of the Senate HELP Committee’s hearing on the nomination of Dr. John King to serve as secretary of education is available at <http://1.usa.gov/1OXb2Mg>.



## **GOOD TESTS MATTER: PARCC and SBAC Tests Receive Top Marks for Test Quality, Mixed Results for Achievement Standards, According to New Reports**

New tests developed by two state consortia more effectively target and assess essential college- and career-readiness skills than some other tests, according to two new reports.

The reports, produced by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), evaluate the quality of four standardized tests aligned with new rigorous college- and career-ready standards: the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), ACT Aspire, and tests developed by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). The reports find that the PARCC and SBAC tests emphasize the most important content students need for college and career readiness and more effectively assess students' higher-order thinking skills than MCAS and ACT Aspire.

“[T]he next generation assessments that were developed with the Common Core in mind have largely delivered on their promises,” according to the Fordham report. “[T]hey tend to reflect the content deemed essential in the Common Core standards and demand much from students cognitively. They are, in fact, the kind of tests that many teachers have asked state officials to build for years. Now they have them.”

For the reports, Fordham and HumRRO compared the English language arts/literacy (ELA) and math assessments for each test provider against criteria developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to measure test quality. The evaluations focus on two key components of each test: (1) how well each test assesses the *content* students' need most for college and career readiness and (2) how well each test assesses the *depth* of knowledge necessary for college and career readiness, as demonstrated through measurements of students' thinking skills. The reports evaluate how well each test aligns with the CCSSO test quality criteria and assign ratings of excellent, good, limited/uneven, or weak for each criterion. The Fordham report evaluates the fifth- and eighth-grade tests from each provider, while the HumRRO report evaluates the high school assessments.

The PARCC and SBAC fifth- and eighth-grade ELA tests earned twice as many good and excellent ratings as the ACT Aspire and MCAS tests, according to the Fordham report *Evaluating the Content of Quality Next Generation Assessments*. The four testing programs earned similar ratings on their math assessments; although, PARCC was the only math assessment that earned all good or excellent ratings, according to the Fordham report.

“These reports definitively confirm what we've been saying for some time—PARCC is the highest-quality, best-in-class assessment available,” says **Hanna Skandera, secretary of education for the New Mexico Public Education Department and chairwoman of the PARCC governing board**, in a [statement](#) about the findings.

On the high school math tests, both PARCC and SBAC earned all excellent and good ratings for their effectiveness in measuring the content and depth of knowledge necessary for college and career readiness, as shown in the table below from the HumRRO report *Evaluating the Content*

and Quality of Next Generation High School Assessments. Meanwhile, on the ELA tests, PARCC and SBAC each earned excellent ratings on five out of the six content criteria, while ACT Aspire and MCAS each earned mostly limited/uneven and weak ratings for content. On depth of ELA knowledge assessed, SBAC was the only test to earn all excellent and good ratings, according to the HumRRO report.

High School Mathematics				
Criteria	ACT Aspire	MCAS	PARCC	SBAC
<b>I. CONTENT: Assesses the <u>content</u> most needed for College and Career Readiness</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>C.1 Focus:</b> Tests focus strongly on the content most needed in each grade or course for success in later mathematics (i.e., Major Work).	<b>L</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>C.2: Concepts, procedures, and applications:</b> Assessments place balanced emphasis on the measurement of conceptual understanding, fluency and procedural skill, and the application of mathematics.	<b>W</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>
<b>II. DEPTH: Assesses the <u>depth</u> that reflects the demands of College and Career Readiness</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>C.3 Connecting practice to content:</b> Test questions meaningfully connect mathematical practices and processes with mathematical content.	<b>E</b>	<b>IE</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>C.4 Cognitive demand:</b> The distribution of cognitive demand for each grade level is sufficient to assess the depth and complexity of the standards.	<b>L</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>E</b>
<b>C.5 High-quality items and variety of item types:</b> Items are of high technical and editorial quality and test forms include at least two item types, at least one that requires students to generate a response.	<b>L</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>G</b>
<b>Legend:</b>				
<b>E</b> Excellent Match	<b>G</b> Good Match	<b>L</b> Limited/Uneven Match	<b>W</b> Weak Match	<b>IE</b> Insufficient Evidence

“These evaluations confirm the work of educators in our member states, who built this system from the ground up to measure students’ college and career readiness,” says **SBAC Executive Director Tony Alpert**, in a [statement](#) responding to the Fordham and HumRRO reports. “We are confident our assessment system will continue to be recognized as an historic and groundbreaking system to improve teaching and learning.”

The Fordham and HumRRO reports give the PARCC and SBAC assessments top ratings for the quality, complexity, variety, and level of rigor of the test items they include. But a separate study by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) finds that the *achievement* standards (or cut scores) these testing providers have set do not necessarily indicate that students have mastered college- and career-ready content equally.

“State achievement standards represent how much the state expects their [sic] students to learn in order to reach various levels of academic proficiency,” according to the AIR report *National Benchmarks for State Achievement Standards*. SBAC, for instance, groups student test scores

into four achievement levels and indicates that a score at or above Level 3 suggests a student is ready for college-level course work. PARCC, meanwhile, groups student test scores into five achievement levels and classifies scores at or above Level 4 as a sign of college readiness.

The AIR report finds that the PARCC and SBAC classifications of “college readiness” are not equal. “Smarter Balanced college-ready standards (Level 3) are significantly below PARCC college-ready standards (Level 4) by about one-quarter of a standard deviation,” meaning the PARCC tests expect students to reach a higher level of mastery before designating them “college ready.”

Furthermore, in most cases, the proficiency standards for the two testing consortia fall short of the level students must achieve to reach proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which many analysts consider the “[gold standard](#)” for measuring student achievement.

In the study, AIR compares the fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math achievement standards for PARCC, SBAC, ACT Aspire, and several individual states with those for NAEP. The study finds that in both ELA and math in both grades, a Level 3 score on SBAC compares in difficulty to the basic level on NAEP. Meanwhile, SBAC’s Level 4, the consortium’s highest achievement standard, aligns with NAEP’s proficient level in ELA and math for both grades.

PARCC’s Level 4 college-ready standard aligns with the NAEP basic level for ELA in fourth- and eighth-grade. In math, however, PARCC’s Level 4 compares to NAEP’s proficient level, according to the report. Scores at PARCC’s Level 5, the test’s highest achievement standard, align with NAEP’s advanced level in fourth- and eighth-grade math and fourth-grade language arts. Level 5 scores on PARCC’s eighth-grade ELA test align with NAEP’s proficient level. The report notes several caveats to these comparisons. For PARCC and SBAC, the researchers compare the consortia’s *ELA* standards, which include writing, to NAEP *reading* standards, which do not include writing. Furthermore, NAEP does not measure identical content as PARCC and SBAC, so aligning the scoring scales for the three tests can only *estimate* how test scores compare since the scores do not necessarily equate directly.

In addition to these reports on the PARCC and SBAC assessments, the Center for American Progress (CAP), an independent nonpartisan policy institute, also recently released *Better Tests, Fewer Barriers: Advances in Accessibility Through PARCC and Smarter Balanced*. The CAP report highlights the positive advancements the two consortia have made designing built-in test features and accommodations to support English language learners and students with special needs.

The Fordham report *Evaluating the Content and Quality of Next Generation Assessments* is available at <http://edexcellence.net/publications/evaluating-the-content-and-quality-of-next-generation-assessments>.

The HumRRO report *Evaluating the Content and Quality of Next Generation High School Assessments* is available at [https://www.humrro.org/corpsite/sites/default/files/HQAP\\_HumRRO\\_High\\_School\\_Study\\_Final%20Report.pdf](https://www.humrro.org/corpsite/sites/default/files/HQAP_HumRRO_High_School_Study_Final%20Report.pdf).

AIR's report *National Benchmarks for State Achievement Standards* is available at <http://www.air.org/resource/national-benchmarks-state-achievement-standards>.

CAP's report *Better Tests, Fewer Barriers: Advances in Accessibility Through PARCC and Smarter Balanced* is available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/report/2016/02/25/131789/better-tests-fewer-barriers/>.



### **HIGHER STANDARDS, HIGHER ACHIEVEMENT: New Report Finds Standards-Based Reform Efforts Benefit High-Poverty Students**

States committed to standards-based reform have seen the greatest improvements in learning outcomes for students from low-income families, according to a new report from the Center for American Progress (CAP), an independent nonpartisan policy institute. Moreover, states that have abandoned or otherwise not embraced standards-based reform completely have demonstrated fewer gains or experienced declines in the academic performance of their poorest students, according to the CAP report.

The report, *Lessons from State Performance on NAEP: Why Some High-Poverty Students Score Better than Others*, examines the relationship between the academic achievement of students from low-income families and states' implementation of standards-based reforms, such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). According to the report, standards-based reform generally refers to educational practices built around a set of academic standards that "specify what students should know and be able to do in each grade level and subject" and that "guide educators' work in the classroom, helping teachers set goals for students."

The CAP report finds that "improvements in state standards policies were associated with academic growth for students from low-income families, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP]." Specifically, the study examines the performance of fourth- and eighth-grade students on the reading and math NAEP exams for their respective grades. States that demonstrated stronger implementation of standards-based reform experienced greater gains on two of the four NAEP exams: fourth-grade math and eighth-grade reading. (The study does not find a connection between standards-based reform and student scores on the other two NAEP tests: fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math.)

For example, states such as Florida, Massachusetts, Tennessee, and Washington, DC, that "have thoughtfully pushed standards" saw their NAEP scores increase by more than 10 points during the past twelve years, the report notes. By contrast, "[t]here are about a dozen states that have shown less than a 5-point [sic] gain for low-income students, on average, including Kansas, Iowa, Idaho, Montana, and North and South Dakota," the report says. "Generally speaking, these states appear to have not embraced standards-based reform fully."

Between 2013 and 2015, [student performance on the NAEP declined](#) nationally in fourth- and eighth-grade math and eighth-grade reading, while fourth-grade reading scores remained flat. Many critics of standards-based reform blamed the CCSS for the dip.

But the CAP report notes that it is too soon to accurately gauge the impact of the CCSS. So the CAP study takes a longer-term view and examines the relationship between standards-based reform and the academic achievement of students from low-income families during the preceding decade. The researchers measured student achievement through average NAEP scores from 2003 through 2013 and measured changes between each biennial administration of the test.

To quantify differences between how states implemented academic standards, the researchers assigned each state a “policy implementation score” based on various indicators that measured the quality of a state’s academic standards, assessments, accountability systems, and equity in school funding. States earned higher scores for having (1) grade-specific academic standards in English language arts, math, science, and social studies; (2) aligned assessments that included open-ended response questions; and (3) accountability systems that rewarded high-performing schools and sanctioned low-performing ones. The researchers used regression analysis to compare the relationship between the states’ policy implementation scores and the NAEP scores of high-poverty students over time.

The researchers caution that their findings do not establish a direct cause-and-effect connection between standards-based reform and student achievement but simply demonstrate a positive relationship between the two factors. Furthermore, the study does not account for all factors that potentially could impact student academic performance or the quality of policy implementation.

Nonetheless, the report suggests that “states that have embraced standards-driven reforms over the past decade have enabled low-income students to perform at much higher levels.” Adopting and implementing standards-based reform is just the first step, though, the report notes. If states want to sustain students’ academic gains, they must help teachers master the new standards, develop the instructional techniques that support those standards, and craft high-quality curriculum materials to guide instruction, the report adds.

“One of the most important aspects of standards-based reforms such as the Common Core is that such standards raise expectations for all students,” says **Catherine Brown, vice president of education policy at CAP**. “Improving testing practices and building instructional capacity are two ways that states can help their districts, schools, and teachers implement the Common Core standards and therefore raise the bar for student achievement.”

*Lessons from State Performance on NAEP: Why Some High-Poverty Students Score Better than Others* is available at <http://ampr.gs/1Vznd7f>.

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