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WAIVING AWAY HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE ACCOUNTABILITY?: State NCLB Waiver Proposals Threaten to Weaken Accountability for High School Graduation Rates

In September 2011, with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—currently known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act—stalled in the U.S. Congress, President Obama outlined a plan to provide states flexibility within specific provisions of the law in exchange for state-led reform efforts to close achievement gaps, evaluate teachers and principals, promote rigorous accountability, and ensure that all students are on track to graduate ready for college and a career.

In November 2011, eleven states—Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Tennessee—submitted applications to the U.S. Department of Education for waivers from up to ten provisions of NCLB, including new accountability systems that would factor multiple measures of student achievement in order to provide a more complete picture of school performance.

After analyzing the waiver plans submitted by these eleven states, the Alliance for Excellent Education found that while the plans move accountability in a direction more aligned with college and career readiness, their treatment of high school graduation rates may reverse progress made in recent years to ensure accurate graduation rates are fully included in school accountability systems. These findings are contained in a new Alliance policy brief, “Waiving Away High School Graduation Rate Accountability?”

“In today’s information-age economy, high school graduation must be the starting point, not the finish line for a student to be economically successful throughout life,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “It is vital that graduation rates be included as a core component of state accountability systems. States that are revising their waiver applications to incorporate graduation rates more appropriately should be applauded for doing so.”

Under NCLB, states used inconsistent and inaccurate graduation rate calculations. High schools in some states could improve their graduation rates by less than 1 percentage point and still avoid consequences under the law, the analysis finds. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education issued regulations requiring common, accurate graduation rate calculations for all high schools.

Under the 2008 regulations that took effect in the 2010–11 school year, schools reporting consistently low graduation rates automatically trigger improvement actions. Additionally, high

schools that do not meet rigorous but achievable targets are required to undergo improvement. This could change under some of the current state waiver proposals, according to the Alliance analysis.

In conducting its analysis, the Alliance examined state waiver applications submitted by Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. Under some state waiver proposals, the Alliance found that high school graduation rates would only account for a modest portion—14 percent to 30 percent, depending on the state—of complex accountability indexes that include tests, graduation rates, and other measures of college and career readiness. These indexes intend to provide a more accurate view of student achievement and drive students toward the goal of being ready for college and a career.

“If test scores in earlier grades or other indicators count far more for measuring a school’s progress than whether a student actually graduates, the fact that high school graduation rates count for so little in the proposed indexes could create an incentive for schools to ‘push out’ low-performing students in order to increase scores on standardized tests,” said Wise. “States are moving in the right direction by creating accountability systems that provide a more complete view of whether students are ready for college and a career, but this cannot come at the expense of holding states accountable for graduation rates.”

In its analysis, the Alliance calls on the U.S. Department of Education to ensure that proposals approved through the waiver process do not weaken the department’s more rigorous 2008 high school graduation rate regulations. In addition, the Alliance recommends that the department only approve waiver applications that give equal weight to high school graduation rates and measures of student achievement, while also allowing states to use additional measures of college and career readiness in their accountability systems.

The complete policy brief, which includes an analysis of all eleven state applications, is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/WaivingAwayAccountability.pdf>.



STATE OF THE UNION: Obama’s State of the Union to Focus on Rebuilding an Economy Where “Hard Work Pays Off and Responsibility Is Rewarded”

On Tuesday, January 24, at 9:00 p.m., EST, President Barack Obama will give his 2012 State of the Union address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress. The State of the Union address allows the president to report on the condition of the nation, but it also gives him a national stage on which to outline his legislative agenda for the coming year.

In a video sent to supporters on January 21, Obama said this year’s address would focus on what he called the “central mission” of the nation: rebuilding an economy where “hard work pays off and responsibility is rewarded—and an America where everybody gets a fair shot, everyone does their fair share, and everybody plays by the same set of rules.”

Obama said his State of the Union address would be a “bookend” to a [speech he gave on the economy in Osawatimie, Kansas on December 06, 2011](#) that focused on the inequality he sees in today’s economy and the disappearing middle class.



In the video sent to his supporters (right), Obama said his State of the Union address will include a blueprint for an economy that is “built to last.” Specifically, he said his blueprint contains four parts: more good jobs and more products made in America; energy produced in America and alternative energy sources; education and training that people need in order to succeed in today’s workforce; and a return to American values of fairness for all, and responsibility from all.

Watch the complete video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jM9ArTbJquk>.

STATE OF THE UNION BINGO: Alliance Brings Back Its Popular Bingo Cards for 2012 State of the Union Address

President Obama previewed some of the themes he intends to raise in his 2012 State of the Union address, but will he mention education reform? Specifically, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), is ten years old and is long overdue for a revamp. Both the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives are considering legislation to rewrite NCLB, but few people expect a final bill to reach the president’s desk in 2012.

Will the president use the State of the Union address to urge Congress to speed up its work on revamping NCLB? Or will he stick to more general themes linking education to better outcomes for individuals and the nation? Will he even mention education at all?

To help viewers keep up with these themes and more, the Alliance for Excellent Education has brought back its popular State of the Union Bingo cards. With three different versions of the cards available, viewers can play with friends or play more than one card at a time.

For complete instructions on how to play or to download one or more of the Alliance’s Bingo cards, visit http://www.all4ed.org/blog/state_union_bingo_2012.

To follow the State of the Union conversation on Twitter, use the hashtag #SOTU. Additionally, follow the Alliance on Twitter at www.twitter.com/all4ed to live chat or go head-to-head in Bingo during the State of the Union address.



STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESSES: Governors Focus on Education Reform as Key to Improving Economic Futures for Individuals and State Economies

The start of a new year means governors around the country are delivering state of the state addresses, during which they report on the condition of their state, preview budget plans, and outline legislative agendas. According to a [recent report](#) from the National Governors Association and National Association of State Budget Officers, states’ fiscal situations have

rebounded from the depths of the recent recession, but state revenues and spending figures remain below their prerecession levels.

With revenues finally starting to improve, governors seem willing to increase spending in areas such as education that they believe are most crucial to their states' economic future. Repeatedly, governors across the nation used their state of the state addresses to stress the link between a quality education and an individual's future job prospects.

Florida: An educated workforce is the “bedrock of any sound, sustainable economy”

During his [state of the state address](#) on January 10, **Florida Governor Rick Scott (R)** urged state lawmakers to boost spending on education, stressing that one of his most important roles as governor is to secure the right of every Floridian to a quality education. “While lowering taxes and eliminating unnecessary regulations are critical, the bedrock of any sound, sustainable economy is an educated workforce well equipped to meet the challenges of an advanced global marketplace,” Scott said.

Scott, a Republican in his first term, recommended increasing spending on education by \$1 billion annually, a plan that, according to *Education Week*, would boost per-student funding by about 2 percent, to \$6,372. The governor called this request “the single most important decision we can make today for Florida’s future.”

According to an article in the [Miami Herald](#), Scott’s proposal received a positive response in the state legislature, where Senate education leaders hoped to add to Scott’s request.

“I hope that we can meet him and actually raise him,” said **Senator David Simmons (R) who chairs the Senate subcommittee on PreK-12 education appropriations**. “I hope that we will be able to add \$300 million to that.”

At the same time, however, school district officials and union leaders say the request will not make up for deep cuts to the education budget in past years, including a \$1.35 billion cut to the education budget last year, the article reports. Since 2007, the state’s education budget has fallen from almost \$19 billion in 2007 to \$16.6 billion in 2011.

“This proposal puts a small bandage on the gashes inflicted with last year’s budget,” said **Florida Education Association President Andy Ford**. “We need to do better.”

To support his call for increased funding, the governor referenced a first-year teacher who serves students in a small farming community where students’ limited resources do not inhibit their dreams of becoming doctors, lawyers, or business owners.

“I heard one thing very clearly, over and over,” said Scott. “Floridians truly believe that support for education is the most significant thing we can do to ensure both short-term job growth and long-term economic prosperity for our state.”

Georgia: Preparing students for the future by starting early

On January 10, **Georgia Governor Nathan Deal (R)** used his [state of the state address](#) to implore the state to “provide great schools that will cultivate the minds of our young people.” One of his goals, as expressed during the state of the state speech, is to educate students better at an early age in order to ensure that they are ready for postsecondary studies or a job. Deal aims to achieve these initiatives throughout the new fiscal year by providing additional teaching jobs and additional funding for teaching salaries.

Deal called for amendments in the previous fiscal year budget and a 2013 budget that would take advantage of a stabilization in revenues to appropriate an additional \$146.6 million to fully fund enrollment growth in K–12 schools. Additionally, his budget proposes an additional \$55.8 million to fund salary increases for Georgia teachers based on training and experience.

Deal also stressed the importance of literacy among the state’s youngest learners, noting that children who are not reading at grade level by third grade are “more likely to drop out of school, go to prison, and have higher unemployment rates later in life than their reading-proficient peers.” Therefore, Deal aims to invest more funding in early childhood education programs so that more students are learning at a proficient level by third grade. The governor noted that these investments are critical to ensure students are progressing from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” To support this initiative, the budget includes \$1.6 million for a reading mentors program.

Deal told attendees that he believes students graduating from Georgia high schools should be fully ready for postsecondary studies or a job and that amendments to the budget along with additional educational investments should be a part of the tools to get them there.

“Young men and women who have done everything asked of them by our K–12 system should be fully ready for postsecondary study or a job,” Deal said. “Going forward, we will reclaim that mission by ensuring that there is a more seamless transition from high school to further study and from postsecondary study to the workforce. With our young people facing a difficult job market and stiff global competition for good jobs, we must do everything in our power to ensure that our education system provides graduates with real opportunity.”

Idaho: “Students Come First”

During his January 9 [state of the state address](#), **Idaho Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter (R)** declared that education is one of his top priorities for the fiscal year and pledged to increase funding for K–12 education by \$31.6 million.

Otter said he intends to fund a slate of education reforms known as “Students Come First” that he first signed into law in 2011. Included within the list of reforms is requiring students to take online courses, expanding technology in schools throughout the state, and placing restrictions on collective bargaining. The initiative would also provide laptops for each student in the classroom and pay teachers based on merit.

The governor also asked state lawmakers to support his bid to replenish a reserve account for public education with \$29 million that the state had mostly depleted in recent years because of the recession.

While encouraging state lawmakers to make increased education spending a priority, Otter stressed that “when it comes to education, we cannot rely on the policies of the past to prepare our children for the possibilities of the future.”

Iowa: Sticking to the core, building a well-rounded student

In his [state of the state address](#) on January 10, **Iowa Governor Terry Branstad (R)** introduced an educational reform blueprint that was based on conclusions from an education summit for some of the state’s top educators and a road trip full of education town hall meetings to get feedback from teachers, administrators, and parents.

Branstad assured listeners that the Iowa Department of Education would continue to improve state standards in math, science, English, and social studies while working with educators to develop new standards for music, fine arts, character education, physical education, entrepreneurship education, applied arts, and foreign languages.

Branstad spoke extensively on the importance of literacy and providing the resources necessary to ensure that all Iowan children can read at or above grade level by the third grade, and the danger of promoting children to the next grade when those basic skills have yet to be achieved.

He also spoke on the need for increased spending and investment in education through innovation and better preparing students for the workforce.

“Our children’s future depends on whether they learn the knowledge and life skills needed to succeed in a global economy and be well-informed, good citizens for the twenty-first century.” Branstad said. “Our state’s future depends on whether the quality of our schools matches the best-performing schools anywhere in the world.”

Kentucky: Ensuring a “work-ready community”

In his January 4 [state of the state address](#), **Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear (D)** outlined one of the most austere state budgets in the state’s recent history, which proposes 8.4 percent in spending cuts for many agencies and limits money for new construction projects. However, the second-term Democrat announced that funding for K–12 and preschool programs would be relatively exempt.

Beshear’s address focused on ensuring a “work-ready community” by improving workforce training. Specifically, he discussed making the state’s career and technical education courses more rigorous in order to integrate them more fully into the secondary education system. Additionally, he said the state had adopted a dual-credit agreement that would allow students in high school to earn college credit for approved courses, including those in career and technical education. Beshear said this change would “speed a student’s path to a certificate or degree,

reduce his or her costs, and keep them in school by tying class work directly to their future careers.”

Beshear also called on the state legislature to pass a bill that would raise the mandatory school age from sixteen to eighteen to keep students in school longer. “In Kentucky alone, 6,000 students drop out before their eighteenth birthday every year,” he said. “As a direct result, they are more likely to be unemployed, to earn significantly less money when they do find work, and to find themselves on welfare or in prison. By letting them jeopardize their future, we are failing our youth and we are costing Kentucky taxpayers millions of dollars.”

South Dakota: Investing in Teachers initiative

In his [state of the state speech](#) on January 10, **South Dakota Governor Dennis Daugaard (R)** unveiled the state’s Investing in Teachers initiative. This program would give bonuses to all of the state’s science and mathematics teachers, as well as the top 20 percent of all teachers in each school district, which would be determined by a combination of test-score growth, classroom observation, and local school input.

“South Dakota wins when our students are prepared to compete in a modern, high-tech economy,” Daugaard said. “It’s hard to overstate the importance of science, technology, engineering, and math in this modern economy. Nearly every high-need career field relies on a strong foundation in these areas.”

According to the governor, the initiative would be a three-year plan beginning with an \$8 million investment for training to lay the groundwork for the system during Fiscal Year 2013. Then, beginning the next year, \$5 million would be applied toward ongoing funds for bonuses of \$3,500 a year for math and science teachers. Lastly, \$10 million would be allocated for ongoing funds the following year for \$5,000 performance-based bonuses. Overall, Daugaard’s budget would increase state aid for education to almost \$370 million, which is a funding increase of \$40 million, or 11.9 percent.

Daugaard hopes the plan allows the state to recruit better teachers while also increasing declining scores on assessment tests. “Our schools do well, and our test scores are good, but they have flatlined,” he said. “Our ACT scores, our NAEP scores, and our graduation rates are above the national average, but they have been relatively unchanged for years.”

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events 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. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor; Kenya Downs, communications associate; and Kate Bradley, copyeditor.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance, visit <http://www.all4ed.org>.