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Public Education Policy And Progress



LET'S GET DIGITAL: First-Ever National Digital Learning Day Attracts Participation from Thirty-Nine States, 19,000 Teachers, and 1.7 Million Students

On February 1, thirty-nine states, 19,000 teachers, and 1.7 million students participated in the first-ever Digital Learning Day, a national awareness campaign spearheaded by the Alliance for Excellent Education showcasing how technology can take learning in the United States to a much higher level and provide all students with experiences that allow them to graduate from high school prepared for college and a career.

“Technology has made nearly everything in modern life more efficient, accessible, richer, and faster, yet students are frequently asked to check their smart phones, laptops, and other devices at the door when they enter a classroom,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “It is time we stop asking students to ‘power down’ when they go to school and instead to ‘power up’ and use their interest in technology as a new way to learn.”

The marquee event for Digital Learning Day was the virtual National Town Hall, where **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** and **Federal Communications Commission Chairman Julius Genachowski** challenged schools and companies to get digital textbooks in students’ hands within five years.



“Education is one of the most important challenges we face as a country,” Genachowski said. “We want to challenge all of the players in this ecosystem to do everything they can to move this country toward universal digital textbooks in the next five years.”

During his remarks, Duncan discussed how technology could help schools move from a school day based on a nineteenth-century agrarian economy to one that prepares all students for a globally competitive knowledge-based economy.

“Our children need access to information,” Duncan said. “They need to chance to learn 24-7. How do we do that? How do we level the playing field? I think technology is the answer. ... I think technology going forward is going to revolutionize how we provide education.”

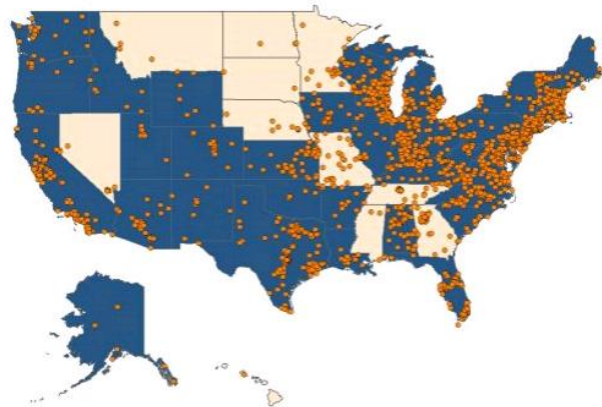
Duncan also stressed that technology would “empower,” not eliminate, the need for great teachers. “Great teachers love the opportunity to interact with their students, not just during the school day but into the evenings,” Duncan said. “They love the idea of having access to great mentors who can help them if they’re struggling with how to reach a certain student ... to have this entire worldwide network of resources to help them get their job done. ... Technology by itself is not the answer. It’s amazing teachers, it’s great professional development”

The National Town Hall also featured **U.S. Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO)** and live interaction via Skype with teachers, students, and leaders from four school districts around the country—Englewood Schools (CO); Mooresville Graded School District (NC); Klein Independent School District (TX); and New Tech West High School (OH)—that are at different levels in their implementation of technology and shared how they are using technology in new ways to improve learning.

“This isn’t theoretical,” Duncan said. “This isn’t some hope in the unseen. This is happening in creative schools and school districts around the country today. Our question, our challenge is how do we go to scale as fast as we can?”

The town hall also profiled great teachers such as **Kristin Kipp, an English teacher at Jeffco’s Twenty-first Century Virtual Academy in Colorado and the 2011 National Online Teacher of the Year**; and **Joseph Isaac, a biotechnology teacher at McKinley Technology High School in Washington, DC**, who discussed how they are effectively using technology to deliver instruction. Also featured were successful education innovation projects, such as the Khan Academy, that demonstrate how technology can be used in the classroom to improve student outcomes.

In addition to the National Town Hall, Digital Learning Day celebrations were conducted in thirty-nine states (in blue in map to the right)¹ and the District of Columbia, representing 88 percent of all students in the United States, and in hundreds of schools and school districts (orange dots in map to the right). In eighteen states, governors, both Democrat and Republican, issued a proclamation declaring February 1, 2012 to be Digital Learning Day.



In addition to the National Town Hall, the Alliance aired an extensive, in-depth webcast demonstrating how digital learning is already being used in classrooms around the country. During the webcast, educators shared innovative approaches designed to ensure that students

¹ The thirty-nine states participating in Digital Learning Day on February 1 were Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

graduate from high school prepared for college and a career. Additionally, several members of Congress, including **Representatives Jared Polis (D-CO), Kristi Noem (R-SD), and Senators Patty Murray (D-WA) and Jeff Bingaman (D-NM)**, provided videos and other messages to demonstrate their support for the work of teachers and students on Digital Learning Day.

Both the National Town Hall and the morning webcast were accompanied by a live chat that provided educators from around the United States and around the globe with the opportunity to connect with each other to discuss best practices in digital learning, share lesson plans, give opinions on infrastructure and technological devices, and network with leaders in education technology.

“Digital Learning Day is not about technology for technology’s sake; simply slapping a netbook on top of a textbook will not move the education needle very much,” said Wise. “Instead, it’s about recognizing the great potential that effective technology has to transform the world of learning when combined with powerful teaching and rigorous content.”

Archived video from the National Town Hall and the morning webcast, as well as a transcript of the live chat, are available at <http://www.digitallearningday.org/DLD2012>.

HELP Committee Chairman Tom Harkin Announces Hearings on Education Technology

On Digital Learning Day, February 1, **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)** announced that the HELP Committee will hold a series of hearings on education technology beginning this spring.

“Technology can change the field of education in previously unimagined ways, but it also brings about its own set of challenges,” Harkin wrote in a [post on the Alliance for Excellent Education’s “High School Soup” blog](#). “It is more than a new way to present information, and policymakers must support teachers to help schools address barriers to technological changes.”

Some of the barriers Harkin listed were insufficient broadband, lack of teacher training, and inadequate funding. “At a time when many state budgets are strapped, investing in programs and training in order to meet the needs of all students, as well as coordinating investments across the elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and career education systems, is challenging but necessary.”

Harkin noted that the HELP Committee has worked to address these challenges through a rewrite of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Specifically, the committee passed a bill to revamp NCLB that includes an amendment introduced by **Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM)** that, if enacted, would reauthorize and update the Achieving Through Technology and Innovation (ATTAIN) Act to help ensure that all students are technologically literate and ready for the demands of the twenty-first-century economy.

In his blog post, Harkin said the HELP Committee’s hearings would “explore how schools are taking advantage of the opportunities technology provides for our students.” He said the committee would explore topics such as blended and online learning, assistive technology, and the importance of professional development. The goal of the hearings is to engage policymakers and the public in a discussion to deepen the understanding of technology’s potential to help students succeed.

Harkin invited the public to post suggestions for education technology topics or programs that the HELP Committee should examine in hearings on his [Facebook page](#) or via Twitter at [@SenatorHarkin](#) using hashtag #edtechhearing. For more details on the upcoming hearings, visit <http://www.help.senate.gov>.



STATE OF THE UNION: Obama Calls for Mandatory School Attendance Until Age Eighteen, Focuses on Importance of Education for “Jobs of Tomorrow”

During his State of the Union address on January 24, President Obama stressed the importance of education in driving the U.S. economy and called on states to require that all students stay in high school until they graduate or turn eighteen.

“When students aren’t allowed to walk away from their education, more of them walk the stage to get their diploma,” Obama said.



The proposal has received a great deal of attention in education circles, with some believing that keeping students in school longer is a good thing while others think that keeping disinterested students in school longer could disrupt learning for others.

“I will concede that having the federal government decree this, that’s going to stick hard with some people,” **Alliance President Bob Wise** told the [New York Times](#). “But with almost one-third of the nation’s students dropping out of high school, we have an economic crisis and we need to be sending a stronger message about the importance of education.”

However, Wise also believes that simply raising the dropout age is not enough. “Decree doesn’t equal diploma,” he said on the [Alliance’s Facebook page](#). “Raising the dropout age to eighteen will keep students in school—that’s the first step. The second step is keeping students engaged.”

The *New York Times* article cited research finding that higher dropout ages improve not only graduation rates but entrance to higher education and career outcomes. Additionally, **Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at Johns Hopkins University**, finds in a 2010 report that of the six states that increased the compulsory school age from 2002 to 2008, two—Illinois and South Dakota—experienced increases in their graduation rates, and one, Nevada, had a decline. “It’s symbolically and strategically important to raise the age to eighteen, but it’s not the magical thing that in itself will keep kids in school,” Dr. Balfanz said in the article.

In Illinois, local educators are asking whether increases in a state’s mandatory school age would be accompanied by increased funding to combat school truancy.

“It’s not a bad idea; the kids probably should be in school until they’re eighteen. But how are we going to ensure that that happens?” **Bob Ingraffia, executive director of the regional education office for northern Cook County** asked in a [Chicago Tribune article](#). “We can’t ensure now that they stay in until they’re seventeen.”

Elsewhere in his State of the Union address, Obama called for better preparing workers for available jobs in science and technology, noting that business leaders tell him that they can’t find workers with the right skills. “That’s inexcusable,” Obama said. “And we know how to fix it.” He called for a national commitment to train 2 million Americans with skills that will lead directly to a job and praised partnerships between companies and community colleges that were already up and running.

But Obama stressed that the commitment to skills and education has to start earlier to prepare individuals for the jobs of tomorrow. He called for resources to keep good teachers on the job and reward the best ones. In return, schools would be given the flexibility to replace teachers who are not helping kids learn.

Although he did not mention either directly, Obama referenced Race to the Top and the common core state standards that have been adopted by forty-six states and the District of Columbia. “For less than 1 percent of what our nation spends on education each year, we’ve convinced nearly every state in the country to raise their standards for teaching and learning.”

To help tackle soaring college tuitions, Obama called on Congress to extend the tuition tax credit and give more young people the chance to earn their way through college by doubling the number of work-study jobs in the next five years. He also asked states to do their part by making higher education a higher priority in their budgets and called on colleges and universities to keep costs down by redesigning courses to help students finish more quickly and make better use of technology.

As he has done in recent years, Obama asked for a plan that would provide a path to citizenship for individuals who want to “staff our labs, start new businesses, and defend this country.” He specifically mentioned students who came to the United States as small children and want to go to college, as well as individuals who came to the United States to study business, science, and engineering, but are sent home as soon as they get their degrees to “invent new products and create new jobs somewhere else.”

Although he did not directly mention a revamp of the No Child Left Behind Act, Obama did discuss more flexibility for states and changes to testing.

Watch [enhanced video](#) of the State of the Union address with data and graphics.



STATE OF THE STATES: Governors Focus on School Finance, Digital Learning, Reading Interventions, and Waivers Under No Child Left Behind

Although education is primarily a state responsibility, the federal government has played a larger role in the last decade through the No Child Left Behind Act and has encouraged states to adopt education reforms more recently through the Race to the Top program. In their state of the state addresses, some governors are pushing to move more control over education back to the state and local levels.

California: Brown Proposes New School Finance System, Less Testing

California Governor Jerry Brown (D) faces an enormous budget crisis, but aims to tackle the state’s budget shortfall responsibly by cutting spending and temporarily raising taxes for the wealthiest taxpayers through November. During his [state of the state address](#) on January 18, Brown called for replacing the state’s school funding and testing systems with a “weighted student formula.”

Brown said the new system would provide basic funding with the exception of money designated for disadvantaged students and English language learners. He said his proposal would “give more authority to local school districts to fashion the kind of programs they see their students need.” Brown also insisted that his proposal would create transparency, reduce bureaucracy, and simplify complex funding streams.

Brown also said the state’s testing system eats up too much class time and is too slow to provide schools information that can inform instruction. He proposed reducing the number of tests and getting the results directly to teachers, principals, and superintendents.

Missouri: Nixon Calls Broadband Access a “Game-Changer”

In his [state of the state address on January 17](#), **Missouri Governor Jay Nixon (D)** discussed the importance of high-speed internet to Missouri’s rural areas, especially its schools. He called broadband access a “game-changer” for commerce, farming, health care, law enforcement and public safety, and education.

Specifically, Nixon pointed to Otterville, Missouri, where the local school now receives broadband and has significantly expanded its ability to provide web-based classes using streaming video. “Just as the railroads and interstates changed the face and the fate of Missouri communities in decades past, this project will help shape Missouri’s future from Otterville to New London and everywhere in between,” Nixon said.

Nixon proposed a \$200 million net increase in K–12 education spending for Fiscal Year 2013, but suggested that spending on higher education be cut by about \$100 million. He also called on the legislature to send him a comprehensive charter school accountability bill that holds all charter schools to high standards of academic achievement and financial integrity.

New Mexico: Martinez Focuses on Reading Reforms, Raising Graduation Rates

Noting that 80 percent of the state’s fourth graders cannot read proficiently, **New Mexico Governor Susana Martinez (R)** called for a \$17 million investment in reading reforms in her [state of the state address](#) on January 17. In her speech, Martinez described a little boy who does not get the help he needs in reading in the early grades, yet he continues to be promoted through elementary school and into middle school.

“[In middle school], he can read the words but doesn’t really understand them, so he struggles to learn about history, geography, science,” Martinez said. “When he can’t meet the standards, we don’t offer him a hand up. We just lower the bar, sending him to the next grade and sending him a toxic message that he’s not capable of making the cut. He’s ashamed, frustrated, and angry. Eventually, he drops out.”

Martinez said she encountered many students like this as a prosecutor, but “not when they were kids but when they were living a life of crime as adults.”

Under her plan, teachers will assess children during early grades and students who are struggling will get immediate help through tutoring and more individual attention. Her plan also calls for more reading coaches in elementary schools.

To help raise graduation rates and prepare students for college, Martinez called for testing kids from fourth through tenth grade to catch kids before they fall too far behind. She also outlined a plan that would pay for tenth graders to take the pre-SAT and expand access to Advanced Placement classes for low-income students.

Martinez also announced a new grading system for New Mexico schools that would give an official letter grade for every school in the state by summer 2012 and urged her constituents to support a teacher evaluation system that “must measure the progress their students make in mastering the basics.” Her plan includes making teacher pay and productivity more heavily dependent on the progress of each teacher’s most struggling students.

Oregon: Kitzhaber Pushes for a Waiver from No Child Left Behind

Saying that “all of our job creation and economic development strategies will be futile in the long run unless we are successful in transforming our system of public education and our health care system,” **Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber (D)** used his January 13 [state of the state address](#) to lobby for a bill he would introduce in February—a “home-grown alternative”—that would allow the state to obtain a waiver from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act while providing “smart accountability and better paths to student success.”

Kitzhaber’s plan would create “education achievement compacts,” which are partnerships between the state and its school districts, community colleges, and universities. He said the compacts would “express a common commitment to improving outcomes, but they would tailor outcomes to unique circumstances of individual districts.” He added that they would also allow the state to compare results and progress between districts with comparable populations in order to connect funding to outcomes so the state can become a “smarter investor in education.”

Kitzhaber said the new legislation was “essential” to meeting the state’s goal of a 100 percent high school graduation rate by 2025, with 80 percent of those graduates receiving at least two years of postsecondary education or training and 40 percent earning a bachelor’s degree or higher.

“If we fail to pass achievement compacts in February, we’ll be left with the status quo under No Child Left Behind—an outcome everyone agrees is unacceptable,” Kitzhaber said. “None of us should be willing to accept 65 percent high school graduation rates or the fact that this generation of Oregon children could be the first to be less educated than their parents and their peers around the United States.”

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>.