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HOW'S THE WATER?: Congressional Hearing on High School Reform Recognizes the Crisis, but Urges Caution Before Headfirst Plunge from the Federal Government

On the fifty-first anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, governors from Iowa and Massachusetts told the House Committee on Education and the Workforce that a great deal of inequality still exists in the American education system—especially when it comes to educating minorities and low-income students in high schools. However, while **Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney (R)** and **Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack (D)** said that strengthening high school education is a national priority, they were not ready to see a federal version of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act for high schools.

The hearing, “High School Reform: Examining State and Local Efforts,” was the first of a series that **House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Boehner (R-OH)** plans to hold on the subject of high schools. At the March 17 meeting, it was apparent that Chairman Boehner and **Ranking Member George Miller (D-CA)** understood the crisis facing high schools, but they agreed that the federal government should take some time to observe reform efforts already underway in the states before creating more federal requirements at the high school level.

“We clearly need high schools that equip students with the knowledge they need to succeed after graduation, whether their next step is college or the workforce,” Boehner said. “And it’s pretty clear that the current system isn’t getting the job done. But that doesn’t necessarily mean the solution to the problem should be driven from Washington. And it doesn’t necessarily mean No Child Left Behind ought to be expanded . . . I think we need to take a look at what states and communities are already doing proactively to transform high schools, and ask whether additional federal requirements are even justified.”

Miller envisioned a federal role that could supplement activities undertaken by individual states and philanthropic organizations. He was especially concerned that improvements in reading and math in the early grades had not continued at the high school level. He added that the achievement gap between poor and nonpoor and minority and white students had to be addressed, but, like Boehner, he did not think immediate federal involvement was the answer.

“We should try and build on the effort of the collaboration between the governors and the philanthropic community and others, such as the business community, who are concerned about the relevance and the quality of the high school experience for our students,” Miller said. “We have a great deal to learn before we would come along—especially with the budget concerns that

we have in front of this Congress—and start to lay down a whole new set of requirements at the high school level without resources.”

America’s Next “*Sputnik*” Moment to Come from Asia, Says Romney

In his testimony, Governor Romney cited two reasons for the importance of improving America’s educational system. The first, he said, was the state of urban education, which is failing minority students. “Calling this an achievement gap is a polite way of saying that minority kids are getting an inferior education. Inferior education in our urban schools is the civil rights issue of our generation.”

The second was the failure of American schools to keep up with other countries’ educational outcomes. “Beyond the sad consequences for them as individuals are the alarming implications of that for our nation,” he said. Romney stressed the importance of rigorous curriculum at the high school level and the need for more math and science education. Alluding to the clamor for more American scientists and engineers after Russia’s launch of *Sputnik*, Romney said that our generation “hasn’t had its *Sputnik* moment yet,” but Asia’s emergence as an increasingly strong global player would precipitate it soon.

“Asia is not content making Christmas-tree ornaments,” he said. “They want to build commercial jets and MRI machines. They want to create software and develop new pharmaceuticals. They are planning to become the innovation and technological center of the world and they want it to move from America to Asia.”

Romney said that CEOs from Massachusetts had told him that they planned to move “major operations” to Asia—not for the low cost of labor but because of the plentiful supply of highly educated, highly motivated, technologically skilled workers. “Yes,” he said, “fixing our schools is a social responsibility; it is also a national economic and national security necessity.”

Romney discussed the importance that exit exams had played in Massachusetts in improving student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap between whites and minorities. He also said that dramatic differences between school districts were best explained by the quality of teachers, not the quantity of money the state spent. Romney said he wanted to turn teaching into a true profession and pay proven teachers more money while removing teachers who had failed to generate improvements in student achievement.

Governor Vilsack Promotes the Three Rs as a Solution to High School Woes

Iowa Governor Vilsack talked about the importance of rigor, relationships, and relevance in high schools. He said the high school graduation rate was too low, that too many students are poor learners, and that curriculum needs to be upgraded. Vilsack also noted that high schools must prepare students for jobs that require constant adjustment and skill upgrades.

“The challenge for high schools is to teach and develop students with not only a solid foundation and mastery of academic skills, but also skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, and a love of lifetime learning,” he said. “The goal for students must be not just *what*

to think, but *how* to think, how to apply that knowledge in a variety of circumstances, setting the foundation for lifelong learning. Relevance—teaching students why things are important, and to apply and adapt information—will motivate students to invest their time and energy in the more rigorous work they need.”

Vilsack argued for more challenging coursework, especially in math and science, and a better alignment with postsecondary expectations. He praised dual credit options that allow students to earn college credit while in high school, and said it was especially helpful for engaging students in their senior year. He said Congress can encourage rigor and relationships by supporting dual credit initiatives, encouraging collaboration between K–12 and postsecondary institutions, and providing “sharing incentives” to states. He also said that dual credit provided an important access point to career and technical education coursework.

“It is important to remember that high-quality career and technical education is simply an alternate path—not an inferior path—to the higher-level math and science we know will be required of the jobs of the future,” he said. “It is increasingly recognized as an essential pathway for many of our students, providing a smooth transition between high school and postsecondary work.”

Vilsack also called for significant investments in teacher preparation, recruitment, professional development, and compensation. He praised Iowa’s Student Achievement/Teacher Quality initiative, which made beginning teachers’ salaries more competitive and created a mentoring program for new teachers. Under the initiative, now in its fourth year, new teachers must complete a two-year mentoring program and receive a favorable evaluation before becoming fully certified and licensed to teach in Iowa. If after two years a teacher fails to complete the program, he or she will be given a third year to finish. If unable to pass after three years, that teacher is no longer able to teach in Iowa. Early results for the program, which was adopted with the assistance of the Iowa State Education Association, “show marked improvement in high school achievement, particularly in closing the achievement gaps among struggling learners,” he said.

The hearing provided an opportunity for Congress to dabble in the shallow end of the high school debate and begin to gauge reaction to an increased federal role in the reform process. At the end of the day, the reception from governors was a little cold. As Governor Vilsack said, “Although most high schools across America may agree on why they need to change and what they need to change, we must not attempt a one-size-fits-all solution for high school reform. Just as each student has very individual gifts and needs, each school and each district is unique in its strengths and challenges, and must be allowed to develop its own plan for action, reform, and success.”

The text of Chairman Boehner’s opening statement and witness testimony is available at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/109th/fc/highschool051705/wl51705.htm>.

A complete video archive of the hearing is available at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/hrgarchive.htm>.

Representative George Miller on NCLB for High Schools

When we did No Child Left Behind, let us understand that we [were]are making a major contribution to low-income schools and the question for us was, were we going to continue to spend the tens, hundreds of billions of dollars, and what is the return we're going to get on our investment?

In the case of high schools, we have no history of that involvement; we're not protecting an investment there. I think . . . we would do well for a while to pay great deference to what the governors were doing, what states are doing to make these determinations on how to improve this. Then, if we want to come along and initiate a new federal investment in those efforts, we might do it [on] a well-informed basis, [with] some experience preceding this, as opposed to dropping down a high school version of No Child Left Behind . . . with no real resources.

This is not a billion-dollar effort if you drop those kinds of requirements down on top of your systems. This is big-time trouble, and I think we should do well to think about the governors sort of ramping this up, looking for those pathways, and then the question would be for us, in a short period of time: Do we want to make this kind of federal investment to help those efforts, to supplement these efforts, to grow those efforts?

Representative Miller's complete opening statement is available at http://www.house.gov/apps/list/press/ed31_democrats/rel51705.html.



THE \$14 BILLION QUESTION: New Report to California Lawmakers Offers a Strategic Approach to Improving State's High Schools

Issued on the heels of a conference that showed high school dropouts cost California \$14 billion annually in crime, jail time, and lost wages, a new report to state lawmakers lays out a road map for how California can improve its high schools.¹ The report, *Improving High School: A Strategic Approach*, issued by the state's independent Legislative Analyst's Office, suggests the state increase the importance of dropout and graduation data in state and federal accountability formulas. It also said the state should make high schools accountable for improving student transitions to college and work, and make high schools more flexible in helping students achieve their personal goals after graduation.

The report's most controversial recommendation urged state lawmakers to "reset" the state's standard for proficiency under No Child Left Behind. It said that keeping the proficiency standard high has the practical effect of reducing a school's incentives to help potential dropouts stay in school, because teachers are forced to focus on students just below the bar. **State Superintendent Jack O'Connell**, who praised the overall report, said a lower standard for proficiency would water down the state's world-class standards, and disagreed with the recommendation.

The report categorized California's students into three basis groups based on their high school outcomes: dropouts; "general track" students; and "university track" students. Approximately 30 percent of California's entering ninth-grade class will drop out before attaining a diploma. Similar to elsewhere in the country, large urban school districts in the state have dropout rates that exceed 50 percent. Also, African-American and Hispanic students were more likely to drop out than most other racial and ethnic groups, according to the report.

¹ More information on the conference by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/StraightAs/Volume5No7.html#Harvard>.

In examining the reasons that students drop out, the report notes that most factors are in place by the time students enter ninth grade. Results from the state's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) English Language Arts test showed that about one-third of all eighth graders score "below basic." Of that group, approximately 12 percent—roughly sixty thousand students—scored "far below basic," a level equivalent to randomly guessing at the answers to test questions.

Because of a lack of good data on high school dropouts, the report stated, the state's efforts to hold schools and districts accountable for addressing this problem are ineffective. The report recommended that the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), which assigns each student a unique identifier, be used when it becomes available in 2006 to calculate graduation and dropout rates for high schools and districts.

The second group, "general track" students, represents about 45 percent of the California student population. These students graduate from high school but do not have the number of course credits to qualify for admission to a public university in California. Among this group, postsecondary aspirations far exceed readiness for college—while 70 percent plan to go to a four-year university or community college, only about half actually enroll. Because they do not have clear postgraduation goals, it is difficult for them to use high school effectively to make a smooth transition to adult life. In an effort to smooth these transitions and provide more information to parents and students about post-high school options for work and school, the report recommended intensive career counseling and planning in the eighth and tenth grades.

Under the plan, students in the eighth grade would develop a high school course plan in consultation with parents that would identify the specific courses the student would need to take to reach his or her academic and vocational goals. Two years later, the student would have a "check-in" counseling session that would assess his or her progress and make any changes to the plan that the student or parents wanted. The report notes that an expansion of the high school planning process would benefit all high school students, not just those on a general track.

Students in the "university track," the third group, make up 25 percent of high schoolers and represent those who graduate with the courses needed to establish eligibility for admission to the state's four-year universities. However, even though these students often graduate near the top of their class, they frequently lack the English or mathematics skills required for study at the university level.

In the University of California system, which typically accepts high-achieving students, 30 percent needed remedial instruction in reading and writing. Meanwhile, almost half of California State University system freshmen needed remedial coursework in English (and about 35 percent in mathematics). For community college students, more than 40 percent of entering freshmen needed to retake at least one basic skills course. State-required placement tests show that recent high school graduates enrolling in community colleges need to repeat high school courses in basic English reading and writing (at least two levels below the transfer freshman composition course) and mathematics (below algebra I).

Because each school system sets its own standards, these numbers are not comparable, but the problem is easy to see. High schools are not preparing their graduates for college-level work. At

the same time, research suggests that students who are required to take remedial coursework are less likely to stay in college beyond the freshman year, much less complete their studies.

In an effort to strengthen the connection between college admission policies and the objective measures of what students actually learn in high school, the report recommended that the state use the STAR tests for admission and placement decisions in the postsecondary system. In addition to offering a ready-made set of standards-aligned examinations in history, science, English, and mathematics, the STAR results could also create stronger incentives for learning and provide early signals about student achievement. As early as in the ninth and tenth grades, students could use their STAR results to determine whether they are performing at levels consistent with the university admission standards.

According to the report, students need and want better and more choices in high school—and schools need to be more flexible in providing these choices. In noting that only about 15 percent of high school graduates earn college diplomas, the report said that students need other viable alternatives. It said that students want to feel more involved in their education, and creating choices over their high school program empowers them and their parents to use high school to reach their postsecondary goals.

The complete report is available at <http://www.lao.ca.gov/PubDetails.aspx?id=1322>.



NAIL IN THE COFFIN?: Prospects for President's High School Proposal Grow Dim as Perkins Reauthorization Moves to Conference

In February, congressional leaders were loud in their protest of President Bush's decision to fund a proposed high school initiative with money from vocational education. Earlier this month, Congress moved closer to putting the final nail in the president's proposal when the House of Representatives passed a reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act on May 4, by a vote of 416 to 9. In March, the Senate approved a similar bill, 99 to 0. House and Senate lawmakers now must reconcile differences in their bills in conference.

"In this bill we're protecting the role of states and local communities, and we're asking for results in exchange for the money we're already spending at the federal level," said Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Boehner (R-OH). "Vocational and technical education is a vital component of our nation's educational system. States and local communities use Perkins funding to help prepare youth and adults for a successful future."

In his fiscal 2006 budget request, President Bush proposed paying for his \$1.5 billion high school initiative by eliminating or cutting funding from a number of existing programs that support high school activities. The lion's share was to have come from the \$1.3 billion Perkins program, the federal government's largest contribution to secondary education.

"I am hopeful that [this action] will forever put an end to this idea of the administration that it is somehow going to zero out this legislation, or that it is going to take this money for some other initiative," said Representative George Miller (D-CA), the top Democrat on the committee.

Throughout the reauthorization process, the Bush administration has continued to voice its displeasure with Congress's decision to reauthorize the Perkins program. In a March 9 letter to

Chairman Boehner and **Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Chairman Mike Enzi (R-WY)**, **U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings** said that the House and Senate bills would “continue to reauthorize, with little change, the very programs that have been ineffective in improving the quality of education of our nation’s career and technical education students. It would be irresponsible to continue an investment in a program that does not improve the education of students at the high school level.”

And, while it shied away from any veto threat, the White House Office of Management and Budget reiterated its concerns with the House bill in a May 4 Statement of Administration Policy. “The Administration did not propose reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act because, despite decades of significant Federal spending, the current program is not adequately preparing our students to participate in today’s competitive workforce,” it read. The statement also urged Congress to make changes in conference that would “ensure accountability for Federal funds” and require that funds go to improve student achievement, graduation rates, job prospects, and earnings for postsecondary students.

Republicans said the House bill would provide increased accountability, a greater focus on student academic achievement, and streamlined federal funding to help states and local communities make the most of federal resources. “The bill . . . enhances Perkins by ensuring both secondary and postsecondary students participating in the program are acquiring rigorous academic and technical skills and will have the opportunity to transition into further education and/or successful employment,” said **Representative Mike Castle (R-DE)**, the bill’s author.

Hope for High Schools?

Even with Congress adamantly resistant to diverting Perkins money for other high school reform activities, there might still be a glimmer of hope for some of President Bush’s high school agenda, particularly given the attitude of a key lawmaker who holds the purse strings for the education budget.

Last month, **Representative Ralph Regula, chairman of the House Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee**, hinted that appropriators might find money for high school reform elsewhere in the budget. “I think that may get taken care of,” he told *Education Daily*.

Regula’s comments, combined with the tight budget environment, have led some Democrats to question whether the Perkins program would receive adequate funding. Perhaps in an attempt to allay their fears, Boehner addressed the issue on the House floor. “I have no doubts that the funding . . . that is authorized in this bill will, in fact, happen, just to set the record straight,” he said. For fiscal 2006, the House-passed bill authorizes \$1.3 billion in spending.

Remaking Career and Technical Education for the Twenty-First Century

There is no way to significantly improve high school outcomes without tackling the quality of secondary career and technical education, says a new report from **Jobs for the Future** and the **Aspen Institute Education and Society Program**. *Remaking Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century: What Role for High School Programs?* contains essays that summarize what is known about the value of career-focused high school education and offers a reform agenda for the future of high school career and technical education.

“The consensus among the contributors is that high school career and technical education has reached a critical juncture,” the report reads. “[It] has reached a ‘change or die’ moment when it must confront its capability and commitment to upgrade both academic rigor and technical relevance . . . It is clear, though, that staying the course is not acceptable. Major changes are needed in learning expectations, curriculum and instruction, and external partnerships.”

The report notes that while the role of career and technical education has shrunk, it remains a significant component of American high schools—especially for “non-college-bound” students, who traditionally need the most support to achieve at high levels. Among these students, career and technical education seems to help them stay in high school and graduate, but often does not academically prepare them for college-level work or for today’s workplace.

According to the report, high school graduates who do not continue to college—particularly low-income students and those who are the most at risk—have enjoyed a significant short- to mid-run labor market payoff in jobs that were found with the help of career-focused programs in high school.

Among the contributors to the report, there is both optimism about the possibility of significant upgrading and concern that needed changes simply won’t come fast enough. The authors, who include **Gene Bottoms, director of the Southern Regional Education Board’s High Schools That Work**, and **Virginia Governor Mark Warner**, highlight examples of ways states and schools can change for the better and how states and the federal government can drive improvement in career and technical education programming. They outline a reform agenda for career and technical education consistent with that of high school reform nationally that focuses on rigor, relevance, and relationships. In the end, the authors believe that career and technical education will either take its place as a high-quality high school pathway or cede its role in the American high school experience.

The complete report is available at http://www.jff.org/jff/kc/library/0252/index_html.



SURVEY FINDS THAT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS SPEND LITTLE TIME ON CLASS PREPARATION, ALMOST NO TIME READING

While most American high school students intend to go to college, research has shown that large majorities fail to graduate with the skills they need to succeed and that others do not complete the classes they need to even apply. Now, according to a new report from Indiana University’s High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), it is apparent that students fail to put in the necessary time and academic effort before high school graduation to succeed in college.

“Students reported that their effort was adequate for their high school courses, yet it falls well short of what will be required of them in college,” said **IU Professor Martha McCarthy, director of HSSSE** and author of the new report. The report’s findings represent survey responses from more than ninety thousand students nationwide, from high schools across twenty-nine states, in 2004.

According to the report, *Getting Students Ready for College: What Student Engagement Data Can Tell Us*, 82 percent of respondents planned to enroll in some form of postsecondary education, and another 10 percent were undecided. However, only 27 percent of ninth graders will ultimately enroll and remain in college past their freshman year, according to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

Only 52 percent of students said they were challenged to do their best work at school. They reported that they come to class prepared with relatively little effort, and that they devote little time to studying, yet still receive good grades. About two-thirds of the students who said they spend three or fewer hours a week preparing for class reported receiving mostly A and B grades.

By comparison, the report said that first-year students at four-year colleges and universities spend more than twice as many hours per week preparing for class than high school seniors.

In reading, 78 percent of high school seniors reported spending three hours or less in a typical week reading assigned materials. About 20 percent—one in five high school students—said that they spend *no* time on assigned readings. As the chart below shows, all students, no matter their postsecondary plans, give relatively little attention to reading.

Time High School Seniors Spent on Assigned Reading by Instructional Track

Hours Per Week	Percentage of Respondents				
	Regular/ General	Special Education	College Prep	Career/ Vocational	All Tracks Combined
0	22	34	11	30	18
1–3	62	45	57	57	60
4–6	12	11	22	10	16
7–10	3	4	7	2	5
11–14	1	2	2	1	1
15+	1	5	2	0	1

The complete report can be found at <http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/hsse>.

Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress 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 nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America's secondary school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.