

June 2012

# Getting to 2014 (and Beyond): The Choices and Challenges Ahead

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A collection of essays to encourage constructive dialogue among policymakers,  
educators, and practitioners engaged in school reform.



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## ABOUT THIS COLLECTION

Education Sector commissioned an earlier version of this collection of essays in conjunction with a March 2012 event “Getting to 2014: The Choices and Challenges Ahead.”

This updated version includes new essays and a revised introduction. The aim of these essays is to present ideas, elicit feedback, and encourage productive dialogue among policymakers, educators, and practitioners engaged in school reform.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This collection of essays was made possible with a grant from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. We thank the foundation for its support, but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this collection are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the foundation.

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## ABOUT EDUCATION SECTOR

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## Getting to 2014 (and Beyond): An Introduction

By Anne Hyslop

“1,000 songs in your pocket.” That was the tagline Steve Jobs used to sell America its first iPod. At \$400, it featured a two-inch, black-and-white display, 10 hours of battery life, and the now-iconic click wheel and white ear buds. Since the iPod’s release in October 2001, Apple has refined the basic concept more than 25 times. It introduced iTunes, made the device Windows-compatible, and launched distinct product lines: classic, nano, shuffle, touch, and later, the iPhone. Apple removed buttons, added color displays, and increased storage capacity. And with each update, obsolete models disappeared from shelves to make way for newer products. In the process, more than 300 million iPods have sold worldwide, and Apple has changed the way consumers utilize and interact with media and mobile devices. Now, Apple doesn’t just promise 1,000 songs in your pocket – it gives you that, plus a phone, email, camera, GPS, calendar, personal assistant, and applications that can make dinner reservations, buy movie tickets, and pay for parking ... at half the original’s price tag.

While Apple constantly improves and updates its products, America’s education system lacks an embedded culture of continuous improvement and refinement. Policymakers and educators tend to ping-pong from one silver bullet solution to another, layering half-completed reforms on top of each other rather than sustaining and perfecting one idea over time. Without commitment to a particular strategy to improve schools, states have, by default, continued to work with the equivalent of a clunky, first-generation iPod – the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), also unveiled to the public in the fall of 2001. Despite the rapidly changing world outside the classroom, most schools still operate under a framework established by NCLB more than 10 years ago: mediocre standards, low-quality assessments of basic skills, blunt and rigid accountability systems that label schools “failing” without giving them tools and supports to improve, and a teaching force where quality is measured by inputs mostly unrelated to student learning. >>

But over the next few years, policymakers and educators have a chance to rebuild the framework. A window of opportunity has opened, sparked by NCLB's impossible and illogical deadline for all students to be proficient in reading and math by 2014 – and the realization that a new, improved system is desperately needed before every public school in America is branded a “failure.” States have committed to an array of challenging, yet potentially transformative, reforms – reforms that could fundamentally restructure and improve teaching and learning. These reforms are predicated on an ostensibly simple notion: a K-12 system of education based on the acquisition of basic skills is no longer enough. Readiness and, more importantly, attainment in college and the workforce is the new benchmark of success.

Yet the path to achieve this success is anything but simple. Most states, by necessity, have chosen a complicated, multi-pronged approach to reform. States, for instance, banded together to adopt the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and math – standards taught in elementary and secondary schools, but rooted in postsecondary expectations. Subsequently, two state consortia – the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) – are developing high-quality, high-tech assessments to measure student performance and growth linked to the standards. And with NCLB built on a foundation of standards and testing, more than 35 states are seeking flexibility from the U.S. Department of Education to create new accountability systems that reflect the changing order. Many are linking these plans to school turnaround efforts already under way as part of Race to the Top or the School Improvement Grant program. States also are changing how they evaluate and support teacher and principal performance. And all of this is unfolding in a time of uncertainty: new technologies promise to transform how and where learning takes place; resources and capacity to support implementation are limited and inconsistent; and success hinges on cooperation and trust between stakeholders unaccustomed to working in tandem.

Stakes are particularly high for the 2014-15 school year, when the Common Core standards and assessments are set to be fully launched and

used to make high-stakes decisions about school accountability and personnel. In a sense, states are attempting to jump directly from the iPod to the iPhone, but in a much shorter amount of time. While Apple perfected the iPod over 10 years, many states are allocating less than half that amount of time to develop, pilot, and embed radical changes to their systems for assessment, curriculum, data collection, accountability, school improvement, teacher and principal evaluations, and professional development. And while designing mobile operating systems and microchips isn't simple, it is far easier to standardize and control how a mini-computer is built than a system dependent on human capacity and cooperation, like education.

### *A Whirlwind Timeline*

Kentucky offers one example – arguably, a best-case scenario – for states tackling school reform on all fronts. Unlike other states taking a more focused approach or a “wait-and-see” attitude, Kentucky designed a comprehensive strategy and started early. Even before the effort to develop Common Core standards took off, the Kentucky General Assembly passed landmark education reform. Senate Bill 1, enacted during the 2009 session, reset the state's education system around the goal of preparing all students to succeed in college and the workforce. The legislation required adoption of more rigorous academic standards, a new system of assessments linked from grades three to 12, including high school-readiness and college-readiness exams, and a revised school accountability system based on the new standards, updated assessments, and program reviews in non-tested subjects. Further, Senate Bill 1 demanded K-12 and postsecondary institutions work together to achieve this vision: the state's Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) became an equal partner with the Kentucky Department of Education and Board of Education to align postsecondary entrance requirements in math and reading with the new K-12 standards. And all of this was set against an ambitious timeline: full implementation by the end of the 2011-12 school year.

But even a state that is ahead of the curve in many ways, like Kentucky, has struggled to deal with the scope and pace of reform. The state-level efforts unleashed by Senate Bill 1 collided with national



reforms to promote college and career readiness: the Common Core standards, the two assessment consortia, Race to the Top, and federal waivers from certain provisions of NCLB. Since March 2009, under the leadership of Commissioner of Education Terry Holliday and CPE President Bob King, Kentucky educators have worked frantically to meet not just their own 2011-12 deadline, but the 2014-15 Common Core deadline as well. To do so, the state has undertaken a massive effort to overhaul its data and assessment systems, academic standards, teacher and principal policies, college- and career-readiness benchmarks, and accountability metrics. In a span of only three years, Kentucky:

- became the first state to adopt the Common Core State Standards, approving a draft version before the standards had even been finalized;
- created and administered a new linked system of state-level standardized tests while simultaneously participating in the development of Common Core-aligned assessments;
- developed and field-tested new evaluation rubrics to measure teacher and principal effectiveness;
- rebooted its indicators of school achievement – including student performance and program reviews in a broad range of subjects – to inform a new state accountability index;
- enacted regulations to define common standards for admission and remediation in all public institutions of higher education;
- and leveraged substantial resources to support implementation through competitive grants (\$17 million from Race to the Top), foundation funding (including more than \$8 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), and funding flexibility from the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>1</sup>

In the implementation mayhem, some collisions were unavoidable. For example, legislators drafting Senate Bill 1 didn't have a crystal ball to tell them that the Common Core standards effort would develop so rapidly. Thus, their vision for reform was built on Kentucky standards and Kentucky assessments in place by spring of 2012, rather than Common Core standards and assessments in place by spring of 2015. While the state went ahead and adopted the

Common Core standards, the assessment issue is trickier.

By law, Kentucky must administer new tests in 2012. Contracts with vendors were signed, funding allocated, and plans solidified to use a battery of more rigorous assessments linked to the ACT exam. State officials are trying to prepare educators, students, and the public for the change, putting expectations in check to limit the damage if students' scores go down. Given the stakes attached to the results, educators naturally feel anxious and worried – a real “pressure-cooker” according to one county testing director.<sup>2</sup> While teachers are worried about the changes coming this year, Kentucky recently announced it was leaving the SBAC in favor of the PARCC, signaling the state's intentions to administer PARCC-developed tests in 2015. So as Kentucky education officials, school administrators, and teachers are steeling themselves for the new 2012 assessments, they are doing so with full knowledge that the entire process will likely repeat in only three years.<sup>3</sup> With the constant churn of reform and so many competing priorities at once, the danger that educators will lose focus, grow fatigued, and disengage from the process increases.

## *Navigating the Trade-Offs*

Facing this much simultaneous change on such a tight timeline would be difficult even without the possibility of conflicts between competing priorities. Kentucky is fortunate to have strong leaders at the state-level in both K-12 and higher education, as well as an effective coalition of business leaders, to take charge of awareness and advocacy efforts. Communication between stakeholders is critical, since collisions are more likely to happen when policymakers and educators fail to look across the spectrum of reform and consider how each change affects the other. Thus, those overseeing efforts similar to those in Kentucky must consider how multiple changes look when implemented together, at the same time. If they don't, these dilemmas could derail the opportunity to get school reform right. But if they do, they can anticipate challenges, make smart policy choices, and navigate the trade-offs that naturally follow.

In this collection of essays, our contributors discuss nine potential collisions, providing a framework for

thinking about the choices ahead. They identify points of conflict and offer strategies and solutions to them.

In the opening essay, **Michael Cohen** of Achieve discusses how states are managing the simultaneous transition to Common Core standards and next-generation accountability models. He posits that successful accountability systems will need not only new components and indicators of school performance, but also new expectations for success aligned to college and career readiness. This shift in expectations will necessitate comprehensive, honest communication and engagement to maintain the integrity of both. **Robert Balfanz** from the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University also discusses the trade-offs between competing priorities. He argues that efforts for students to graduate college and career ready should not come at the expense of policies to increase high school graduation. Rather than an either/or approach, states must find ways to raise both readiness and graduation rates.

But even if students graduate high school and are ready for postsecondary work, are they entering a system of higher education that accepts this definition of readiness? **Kevin Carey**, of the New America Foundation, suggests not. While K-12 educators are coalescing around common standards and assessments of postsecondary readiness, their counterparts in higher education operate in a system that tolerates wide variation in admissions, remedial placement, and academic content standards. Carey's essay, along with the following essay by **Joel Vargas** of Jobs for the Future, illustrates the shortcomings of accepted notions of college and career readiness. Vargas argues that efforts to better prepare students must emphasize making relevant connections to college and careers for students, in addition to more rigorous academics. He contends that knowledge and skills beyond what is included in the Common Core – often called “college knowledge” – will be essential to prepare disadvantaged students for postsecondary success and must not be overlooked.

As the 2014-15 school year nears, many states will not only be administering new Common Core-aligned assessments, but also teacher evaluations that rely on value-added data. Patterns of growth from the new assessments may not be comparable to growth from older, dramatically different state tests. **Bill Tucker** of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation suggests

that policymakers and educators should emphasize faithful implementation of the Common Core in the short term, allowing time for value-added measures to adjust to the new tests and preserving the integrity of teacher evaluation systems over the long term.

As teachers are being evaluated in new ways, new designs of teaching are also emerging. In their essay, Public Impact's **Bryan and Emily Hassel** posit that new staffing models and time-technology swaps could extend the reach of effective teachers and help personalize the classroom. But efforts to improve teaching and learning through the Common Core and teacher evaluation systems are built on existing models, rather than innovative ones. The Hassels advocate an approach where these larger efforts could help enable new designs, rather than stifle them.

**Douglas Levin and Geoffrey Fletcher** from the State Educational Technology Directors Association also discuss the role of innovation. They argue that technology must become a core component of school improvement, rather than a supplemental one. With digital – and increasingly open – educational resources, computerized assessments, online professional development, and sophisticated data systems, schools, districts, and states should capitalize on the new digital solutions as a means to break away from the status quo of mediocre school reforms.

All of these new efforts – college- and career-ready standards and assessments, school accountability, teacher evaluation systems, technology – will require significant resources to be implemented well. But as **Allan Odden** of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education notes, resources are in short supply in today's economic climate. By focusing on the most effective programs, rethinking human capital, and budgeting strategically, Odden provides a framework for policymakers and educators grappling to execute multiple reforms in a time of limited resources.

Cohen's opening essay notes the critical role public awareness and communication must play for the Common Core and related efforts to reach their full potential. **Benjamin Boer** of Advance Illinois discusses exactly how a coalition of stakeholders in Illinois is approaching this task in the last essay. By identifying a leading coalition and process to discuss

and solve challenges, Illinois' guiding principles demonstrate how states can take a deliberate, inclusive approach to implementation.

These essays all represent true dilemmas. There are no right or wrong answers. Yet, we hope they provide a forum for provocative ideas: ideas that may not be particularly comfortable or comforting, but are nonetheless worthy of debate as policymakers, practitioners, and educators begin to navigate the challenges ahead.

## Notes

1. Sources include Kentucky ESEA Flexibility Request, Final Submission January 19, 2012; Commonwealth of Kentucky's Race to the Top Part 2 Application for Phase 3 Funding; Kentucky Senate Bill 1; and Danielle Gonzales, in discussion with author, May 2012.
2. Antoinette Konz, "Kentucky students to face more rigorous state tests," *The Courier-Journal*, May 6, 2012, <http://www.courier-journal.com/article/20120505/NEWS01/304290101/kentucky-schools-testing> (accessed May 15, 2012).
3. Catherine Gewertz, "Assessment Consortia: Kentucky Makes Its Choice," *Curriculum Matters*, March 28, 2012, [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2012/03/assessment\\_consortia\\_kentucky.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2012/03/assessment_consortia_kentucky.html) (accessed May 15, 2012).

## Getting Accountability and Implementation Right

By Michael Cohen

The idea of holding schools accountable for results has been a centerpiece of standards-based reform for more than 20 years, dating back at least to the 1986 National Governors Association report, *Time for Results*. This marked a departure from long-standing state practices which focused on prescribing educational inputs. While the idea of holding schools and districts accountable for the achievement of their students was championed by governors, it took the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to begin to transform gubernatorial rhetoric into state policy and action nationwide. Then, and now, federal requirements provide the basic framework – standards, assessments, requirements for adequate

progress, and consequences – within which state accountability systems operate. However, that basic framework is in the process of being overhauled in significant ways.

First, states are exercising leadership in dramatic fashion. They are redefining the mission of the K-12 system to prepare all students for the postsecondary education and training necessary for 21st century careers in a competitive, global economy. They have worked together to develop common academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy that are internationally benchmarked and anchored in evidence regarding college and career readiness. Nearly all the states are now working together in two federally supported consortia to develop new assessments aligned to these Common Core State Standards. The result will be a system of common, rigorous standards and assessments that will be more challenging and more comparable nationally and internationally than the patchwork quilt of 50 different state standards and assessments that have been in place for two decades. Further, with federal funding, many states have created longitudinal data systems that enable them to track the performance and progress of students from the K-12 education system into postsecondary institutions and, ultimately, into careers.

Through Race to the Top, the U.S. Department of Education has pushed states to hold individual educators, as well as schools and school systems, accountable for growth in student achievement, and to use more focused and forceful interventions in the most persistently low-performing schools. Because the federal government has continuously failed to reauthorize No Child Left Behind (the latest iteration of ESEA), the Department of Education is giving states the opportunity to get flexibility from a number of NCLB's requirements. In gaining flexibility to set new "adequate yearly progress" requirements, states must add new features to accountability and maintain the focus on closing achievement gaps. A whole new suite of rich, meaningful, and actionable data indicators for evaluating the effectiveness of the education system will result.

The elements necessary to transform the mission of the K-12 system to prepare all students for the postsecondary education and training necessary for 21st century careers in a competitive, global

economy are in place. The focus in this essay is on the role of the accountability system for driving needed improvements. However, we understand more than ever that strong accountability must be complemented with equally strong efforts to build the capacity for continuous improvement systemwide, i.e., providing classroom teachers and school leaders with the tools and supports necessary to transform teaching and learning and help all students meet the Common Core.

## ***Getting the Accountability System Right***

This is the time for states to commit to reorienting their accountability systems toward college and career readiness. Currently, accountability systems are not based on what it means to be college and career ready and fail to establish expectations for performance that reflect where we need our schools and students to be. Equally troubling, accountability goals are perceived as something to meet to avoid state interference, rather than something meaningful to work toward. Whereas prior systems focused on ensuring that all students meet a minimal level of proficiency, new systems will center on the need to make ambitious but achievable progress in student performance at a much higher level—one tightly linked to readiness for college and career. This will change the components of the system, the indicators that it uses, and the student outcomes it drives toward.

### **Components**

The components of the new accountability system must include statewide student performance goals; processes to differentiate, classify, and support districts and schools; and robust data reporting. Rather than goals that set the “floor” for districts and schools and that are lost within complex accountability formulas, states must develop a clear, broadly shared set of student performance goals linked to college and career readiness. These goals will be set at the state, district, and school levels and connect to a performance management process to drive continuous progress. These goals will also be used by state leaders, including governors, to build support for reform, bring stakeholders toward a common purpose, and communicate that what matters most is real, measurable improvement in student outcomes.

States must also incorporate into their accountability systems processes to differentiate and classify districts and schools based on student performance outcomes that are tied to college and career readiness. This process will identify those districts and schools that are in the greatest need of support and intervention to prepare students at this higher level. It will also link with the state’s overall system of instructional support for Common Core implementation to deliver the appropriate intensity and type of assistance. The process must also encourage districts and schools to move students toward and beyond readiness, and recognize and reward the districts and schools where students have done so. Finally, states must share timely, actionable, and meaningful college- and career-readiness data indicators with educators, policymakers, parents, and the public. There are few state levers as powerful in driving change as the act of making sure that good, clear data on current and predicted student outcomes are widely shared and used by those with the most impact on student learning.

### **Indicators**

The foundation of each of these components will be college- and career-readiness indicators. These indicators will harness data from state P-20 longitudinal data systems to capture students’ course completion and success, as well as educational attainment through both K-12 and postsecondary education. They will also draw on new Common Core-aligned assessments, such as those that will be deployed through the two assessment consortia, to evaluate current student achievement and growth. These assessments will allow for measures that more clearly reflect student academic preparation in English language arts and mathematics compared to what is needed to enter postsecondary education without remediation, particularly in high schools where states’ current achievement indicators rarely capture standards past the ninth or 10th grade. These indicators will reflect a “continuum of readiness” that encourages schools and districts to move students toward and beyond readiness. They will begin in elementary school and reflect student progress toward college and career readiness. And through high school, the indicators will be able to present a rich picture of how well students are meeting and exceeding readiness as measured through courses,



attainment, and achievement. By creating a continuum of readiness, states can accomplish two things that most accountability systems today do not. First, they can ensure that students who are identified as off-track get the attention and resources they need to get back on-track before it's too late. Second, they avoid a situation where the floor becomes the ceiling and instead provide incentives for students who achieve the college- and career-readiness standard earlier in high school to continue to strive for more.

## Outcomes

Finally, the new accountability systems will reflect the expectation that tremendous progress in student outcomes across the country could occur through the unprecedented efforts unleashed through Common Core implementation. States now recognize the need for a stronger and different role for implementation, one that takes more significant support, such as equipping educators with guidance, and curricular and instructional supports and tools. Simply developing high-quality standards and assessments will not lead to improvement. States' accountability systems should be built with the expectation that these efforts should lead to significant improvement in student outcomes overall and particularly for students who start out furthest behind. They also should be built with the goal to rally all toward this vision, to illuminate where implementation needs to get on-track, and to suggest ways to improve so that the promise is met.

## Getting the Implementation Right

There are several key decisions for states to make as they move toward this vision and embrace a new approach to continuous school improvement. One of the most important is whether they want the path to rest on a more gradual gradient of change or one that is more abrupt. Many states likely will take the first approach, where several phases of transition across the coming years reorient the system along the way. This approach has the advantages of infusing college- and career-readiness components and indicators into the system as soon as they are ready, but also giving time for those who affect and those who are affected by the system to focus on a manageable set of changes at any given time.

This approach also reinforces a new expectation of accountability systems to continuously improve their

ability to drive students toward college and career readiness. This means that even when the phases of transition are complete, everyone understands that the system will continue to adjust to better meet its aims. As state data systems mature, they will be able to add additional indicators to their accountability systems, such as high school credit accumulation, participation and success in core high school curriculum, postsecondary remediation and success rates, and workforce participation. Multiple indicators can provide a richer and better-informed picture of student and system performance. However, as indicators are added they should not dilute the importance of student learning and achievement measures.

Given what we know about the rigor of the Common Core in comparison to current standards, it is realistic that no matter how well states transition their systems over the coming years, most states will have a "cliff" point where proficiency declines – and in some states dramatically. States should begin preparing for this now. This could mirror the shift that Tennessee experienced between 2008-09 and 2009-10 when it raised not only its academic content standards, but also its performance expectations for proficiency. Tennessee saw proficiency on eighth-grade math drop from 90 percent to 26 percent between these two years. What it did not see was perhaps the most dramatic part of the story: because it had been preparing educators, policymakers, parents, and the public for this change through two years of intense public outreach, the state experienced little backlash. Most importantly, the following year educators, parents, and leaders could celebrate that Tennessee eighth-graders improved from 26 percent to 35 percent proficient. This support could not have happened without intense and sustained gubernatorial leadership and the partnership of a committed and courageous third-party organization.

## Time to Engage

There is no way to overstate the importance of states beginning now to engage educators, policymakers, parents, and the public in their plans to transition to a college- and career-ready accountability system. It is vitally important first for the integrity of the system itself. Involving all critical actors in the development of the system will ensure it has the legitimacy to

be seen as a positive force for improving student outcomes—one that everyone buys into, supports, and trusts to signal the right things. Stakeholders will realize that the results reflect “truth in advertising,” helping to build deep understanding of student performance. This involvement will also make the system better. Often states have developed these systems in isolation from those they impact the most, and the result can be that they lack the coherence and clarity to make any real impact. Finally, engagement and communication are the only ways to mitigate the very real risk that any dramatic shifts in the system will inspire a backlash. The reforms under way in states today, through Common Core implementation, accountability, and the other areas discussed in this collection, are too important to the nation’s economic future and moral foundation for us not to take every necessary step to ensure their success.

## Doing It All: Raising Graduation Rates and Standards

By Robert Balfanz

Over the next decade, the nation must both raise educational standards through the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and increase its high school graduation rate. Simply put, there is very little work in the 21st century for young adults without high school diplomas, and little work that can support a family for individuals without some postsecondary schooling or training. In this context, neither increasing the college and career readiness of high school graduates, nor graduating more students alone will be sufficient. Yet there are both explicit and implicit tensions between these two goals that need to be acknowledged and resolved for the educational reform efforts of this decade to succeed.

The graduation and achievement challenges are both significant. Currently, only three out of four high school students are earning diplomas, and about 1 million students per ninth-grade class are not graduating from high school. On international comparisons of achievement, our nation’s 15-year-olds are decidedly in the middle of the pack. Some progress is being made. During the last decade, the nation’s high school graduation rate increased by a little more than 3 percentage points, and

elementary and middle-grade achievement has shown modest improvement. High school achievement is more difficult to gauge. High school graduation requirements have increased considerably, and in several waves, since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. As a result, high school has become more academically focused. In a growing number of states, students now must pass either end-of-course or exit exams, as well as accumulate an increased number of academic credits to graduate. Through this, the achievement of 17-year-olds, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), has remained flat (perhaps because today’s 17-year-olds are no more motivated to take a test without significance for them than those of the past), but the number of students taking and succeeding in Advanced Placement (AP) courses has risen dramatically. Yet even with this progress, the gulf between secondary students’ current performance and that which is anticipated by the Common Core standards is large. One only has to compare outcomes on the eighth-grade NAEP test with the expectations of the eighth-grade Common Core standards to see this in glaring relief.

How then can we ensure students who graduate from high school are prepared to succeed in postsecondary schooling and/or training while substantially increasing the graduation rate? This dilemma is particularly acute for schools when the large majority of students who are not graduating are from low-income families and often live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty or economic stagnation.

Some insight can be gleaned by examining the prior decade. A number of states have significantly raised standards and high school graduation requirements and improved their graduation rates. Massachusetts—often viewed as having exemplary state standards—added exit exams to its graduation requirements and saw its graduation rate climb from 77 percent in 2002 to 83 percent in 2009. Alabama became one of the first states to adopt a college-ready course of study, including four years of mathematics, as the default curriculum for its students, and saw its graduation rate increase from 62 percent in 2002 to 70 percent in 2009. Increasing graduation requirements, however, is not always associated with rising graduation rates. California added exit exams to its graduation requirements and has worked to link them to the

requirements and expectations of the state university system but saw its graduation rate decline from 73 percent to 71 percent. One reason for these different outcomes could be that Alabama and Massachusetts, in different ways, took activist roles in building student capacities in conjunction with raising standards, while California disinvested in public education, resulting in some high-poverty high schools with class sizes of 40, making it a challenge for day-to-day instruction to occur, let alone extra help.

Of course, there could be multiple reasons for these disparate state outcomes that have nothing to do with different approaches to managing the tensions between raising standards and increasing graduation rates. More analytic attempts to study the relationship between raising standards and the rigor of assessments and graduation rates have been inconclusive. Moreover, survey data of dropouts highlight that dropping out is an elongated process with multiple factors. In the main, three forces seem to be at work:

- students struggling to succeed at school;
- students impacted by conditions and events outside of school; and
- students who are bored, lose interest, and do not believe their lives will be different whether they graduate or not.

As a result, it is possible that states, where graduation rates and standards have increased, moved more of the third group to stay in school, and that the future challenge to raise graduation rates and standards will become more difficult, as the remaining dropouts become more composed of students who are struggling to succeed in school or are impacted by life events. Yet it is an important starting point to recognize that states have raised standards and graduation rates when they have actively sought to build student capacities through multiple avenues.

How might this approach play out on a broader national scale? First, state and national high school accountability systems need to give equal weight to student achievement and graduation rates. One outcome without the other is not sufficient. Thus, it is important that as states start to build performance index systems around college- and career-ready standards, they do not inadvertently lessen the

weight given to increasing the graduation rate. If, for example, it is possible for schools to meet their improvement targets for multiple years by just raising the performance of the students who graduate, many will likely focus on this task, rather than what they may view as the more challenging tasks of both preventing students from dropping out and bringing their performance up to expected standards.

But it is quite possible to design a state accountability system that propels schools to both increase academic outcomes and raise graduation rates. A number of states—following Florida’s lead—are moving to A-F grading systems. This presents a good opportunity to send educators a signal that both the quality and quantity of high school diplomas matter. States could have an academic index that combines overall performance levels with measures of academic gap closing, as well as college and career readiness (e.g., Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, ACT, and SAT scores; industry-certified career certificates; and college persistence rates and results) in an A-F ranking. High schools could then receive a second A-F grade based on their adjusted cohort graduation rate, with the grade being equal to the graduation rate. Graduation rates below 60 percent would be an F, 60-69 percent a D, 70-79 percent a C, and so on. In this way, schools that achieved one result at the expense of the other would be clearly identified and, as necessary, compelled to improve. Schools that achieved high performance marks, but failed to graduate large numbers of their students would have high academic grades but low graduation ones. Similarly, those that increased their graduation rates by lowering standards, might achieve high graduation marks but would have low achievement grades.

Second, we need to acknowledge that if we continue to concentrate the neediest students in a subset of schools that are not designed for success, we will neither be able to raise performance levels nor graduation rates for these students. In about 15 percent of high schools (through which about half of the nation’s dropouts enter ninth grade), it is typical for the freshman class to be composed primarily of students who are multiple years behind grade level in math and English and have already begun to disengage from school. They may struggle with chronic absenteeism, behavior problems, and course failure in the middle grades. Typically, there is also

a higher-than-average number of students needing or receiving special education services, as well as increasing numbers of English language learner students. Entering ninth-graders are usually joined by a significant number of students repeating the grade at least once.

But this extreme educational challenge is then too often met with a dysfunctional response, including high levels of student suspensions—in an attempt to create order from the chaos—and high levels of teacher and administrator turnover. The adults who stay often adopt a making-it-through-the-day mentality, built upon lowered expectations and reduced adult effort. Current school turnaround efforts focused on a subset of the bottom 5 percent of schools receiving federal School Improvement Grants may prove effective at breaking up the dysfunctional response. But as states move to address all their lowest-performing schools through the Obama administration's offer of ESEA waivers, they will need to develop the capacity to either lower the concentration of student need in these schools or enhance the level of student supports provided.

We need to recognize that the great American school system launched in the big cities in the early 20th century, and largely still in place today, was not created to educate all students—regardless of the skills and outlooks they bring to school—to a common, high standard that prepares them for postsecondary schooling and/or training. In retrofitting this system to its new purpose, there will be many bumps along the way, and many explicit and implicit assumptions will need to be jettisoned. Chief among these is the default remediation strategy of grade retention, based on the valid point that social promotion helps no one, but the flawed assumption that asking students simply to try again, without major changes in how they are taught and supported, works. While data can be marshaled to show that in some instances, for some students, in some circumstances, grade retention works, the data are also clear that students retained twice seldom graduate. Yet, students held back once, for whom the strategy does not work, are at great risk of being held back a second time. This can be seen in the growing number of over-age middle school students in states with tight promotion requirements for high school. No one is angrier than a 16-year-old eighth-grader. We

have few effective interventions for these students. Thus, the costs of these policies across a number of states, like those that retain third-graders who are not reading at grade level, need to be more fully considered. An alternative would be to advance and bring to scale the response-to-intervention efforts.

If all students are to be educated to common, college- and career-ready standards, then we will need to increase the intensity of education and vary its modality until each student succeeds. This could be supported by building pre-k through 12th grade early warning and intervention systems that monitor both off-track indicators for developing core cognitive skills and high school graduation, and on-track indicators for postsecondary success. But this will also require new thinking about ways to recruit a second shift of adults into schools and funding streams to provide the adult capacity needed to enable and propel all students to attend, behave, try, and believe.

The middle grades will also have to be re-invented. This is where low-income students, in particular, fall off the track to graduation. Here the Common Core provides an invaluable tool. Establishing exactly what middle schoolers need to be able to do enables greater freedom—and even experimentation—with how they learn it. One can imagine multiple ways to tap into middle-grade students' desire for camaraderie, adventure, and performance by centering the acquisition of core academic skills in the context of engineering, entrepreneurship, civic engagement, and the arts, and acknowledging their demonstration with intellectual merit badges.

Another avenue would be to use the Common Core to accelerate the rate at which students progress through school. A few states are moving toward awarding high school credit to eighth-graders who demonstrate mastery of high school material. If this became more the norm and was combined with an even larger increase in dual enrollment and AP opportunities in high school, then the final grade of middle school and the final grades of high school could be refashioned as an accelerator to the next level of schooling. This could provide instant relevance to many students who now see these years as a time to coast. It would also position more students to complete college in three years, which helps address both rising costs and a potential



shortage of college seats if we succeed in raising standards and graduation rates. Lastly, what if instead of a fourth year of college, young adults—in return for enhanced financial aid—did a year of national service in high-needs schools, serving as tutors, mentors, and success coaches? This could both create the manpower needed to keep more students on track in more demanding middle and high school courses and serve as a final accelerator, by providing the national service corps members with the 21st century skills of teamwork, communication, and problem-solving that employers are seeking.

## The Missing Question: *What College Are You Ready For?*

By Kevin Carey

The Common Core State Standards were designed “to prepare our children for college and the workforce.”<sup>1</sup> Since the large majority of high school graduates go on to some form of postsecondary education, preparation to succeed in college is a crucial goal for K-12 schools. However, discussions of the Common Core and other college-readiness initiatives tend to elide a crucial question: Which college?

America has the largest and most diverse higher education system in the world, containing thousands of independent institutions with distinct missions, philosophies, student bodies, and academic standards. Locating a defensible common standard of college readiness within them is difficult.

One approach is to aim high and adopt standards from the most well-known and prestigious private colleges and flagship research universities. But formal academic standards at these institutions mostly involve admissions standards that are designed to produce deliberate scarcity. Many more qualified students apply to Harvard than Harvard chooses to accept. And the standard for successfully completing a Harvard degree is substantially lower than the standard for getting into Harvard in the first place, as evidenced by the fact that Harvard and other elite colleges regularly lower their admissions standards for athletes, legacies, and the children of the rich, famous, and powerful, and the vast majority of these students pass their courses and graduate.

At less-selective institutions, by contrast, the relative standards are reversed: admissions standards are lower than passing standards. Almost 20 percent of students entering four-year institutions and more than 50 percent of beginning two-year students – some 1.7 million new undergraduates per year – are forced to take at least one non-credit-bearing remedial course.<sup>2</sup> They have been accepted to college, paid for college, and then labeled by their college as not college ready.

Remedial placement standards have been identified by some policymakers as a useful proxy for college readiness. There are two problems with this approach. First, the remedial placement process itself is often uncoordinated, non-empirical, and disconnected from any formal standards-setting policies.<sup>3</sup> Many colleges rely on inexpensive multiple-choice tests such as the Accuplacer and Compass exams produced by the College Board and ACT, respectively. The passing scores on these tests used for remedial placement vary substantially by college and the exams themselves aren’t aligned with official K-12 standards, Common Core or otherwise. Other colleges delegate remedial standard-setting to individual departments that don’t adequately publicize their remediation standards, align them with local high schools, or study their effectiveness in accurately identifying students who would actually benefit from being shunted off into no-credit course sequences that usually end in failure.

The second problem with remedial placement standards is that they are not, in fact, the same as college-readiness standards. Readiness means more than preparation to enroll in college-level courses; it means preparation to succeed in college-level courses. Many students who avoid or successfully emerge from remediation immediately falter in introductory college coursework. The nonprofit advocacy organization Complete College America reports:

*“Having survived the remediation gauntlet, not even a quarter of remedial community college students ultimately complete college-level English and math courses — and little more than a third of remedial students at four-year schools do the same.”<sup>4</sup>*

According to ACT, only two-thirds of high school students graduate college ready in English, as measured by the correlation between achieving certain scores on the ACT and having a 50 percent

likelihood of earning a B or a 75 percent likelihood of earning a C in introductory college courses.<sup>5</sup> Most students – 55 percent – failed to meet ACT’s math readiness benchmark, and 70 percent fell short in science. Only one quarter of all students tested were statistically ready in English, reading, science, and math. And even this standard is arguably too low – the goal is for students to complete two or four years of college, not just the first semester.

To further see the vast diversity of collegiate academic standards, consider results from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), a test of higher-order critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and communications skills. Sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s *Academically Adrift* report has drawn widespread attention for the finding that many college students show little or no improvement between the time they enroll as freshmen and the time they graduate, as measured by the CLA. Less noted is the huge disparity in absolute CLA results among graduates of different institutions. Students earning diplomas from some open-access four-year universities have lower CLA scores, on average, than students entering highly selective institutions as freshmen.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the single standard of college readiness is a mirage. To some extent, this can be ameliorated through communication, cooperation, and public policy. States that offer so-called “merit-based” college scholarships, like the Louisiana TOPS program, could align their scholarship eligibility criteria with defined scores on assessments aligned with the Common Core. Large public universities that admit most, but not all, applicants could match their admissions criteria and remediation placement policies with Common Core assessment results, essentially replacing the SAT and Accuplacer with tests that are designed to assess what students are actually being taught (or at least, are supposed to be taught) in K-12 schools.

More broadly, public officials who are ultimately responsible for overseeing the conduct of public higher education could start asking why, exactly, it’s a good idea to have college academic standards subject to little or nothing in the way of inquiry, debate, coordination, empiricism, or study. The first response will be “Academic freedom!” (As will the second, third, and fourth.)

Academic freedom is a cornerstone value of any robust scholarly system, and the substantial autonomy that American colleges and universities enjoy in defining what and how they teach contributes greatly to the richness and texture of our colleges and universities.

But we must acknowledge that few freedoms are optimally limitless or without cost. In the core curricular areas that form a large proportion of student course-taking in the later secondary and early postsecondary years, students are often working in fields where the question of appropriate foundational subject matter is mostly settled. It does not seem beyond reason to suggest, for example, that public K-12 school systems and public higher education systems could forge some agreement around appropriate standards in mathematics and realize those standards in the form of assessments, policy, and curricula that are consistent across the K-12 / higher education divide.

Ultimately, the lack of a unitary college-readiness standard will require educators and policymakers to make careful choices based on evidence and sound judgment. To align college readiness with our highest aspirations for college learning would be impractical. To tie college readiness to the depressing reality of what students in less-selective colleges actually experience would betray the underlying goals of the Common Core. A middle ground will have to be found that adheres to authentic collegiate standards while offering an accessible path into diverse higher education institutions for a large number of college-bound students.

## Notes

1. Common Core State Standards Initiative website, <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards>
2. Complete College America, *Remediation: Higher Education’s Bridge to Nowhere* (Washington, DC: April 2012) <http://www.completecollege.org/docs/CCA-Remediation-summary.pdf>
3. Susan Headden, “How the Other Half Tests,” *Washington Monthly*, September/October 2011, [http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/septemberoctober\\_2011/features/how\\_the\\_other\\_half\\_tests031638.php](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/septemberoctober_2011/features/how_the_other_half_tests031638.php)
4. Complete College America, *Remediation: Higher Education’s Bridge to Nowhere*.

5. ACT, *The Condition of College & Career Readiness* (Iowa City, IA: 2011), <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr11/pdf/ConditionofCollegeandCareerReadiness2011.pdf>
6. Council on Aid to Education, as cited in Kevin Carey, *College Rankings Reformed* (Washington, DC: Education Sector, 2006) Figure 2.

## College and Career Success for Low-Income Youth

By Joel Vargas

The success of college- and career-readiness reforms hinges on whether schools can help more low-income and minority students, the fastest-growing groups in our nation's schools, get ready in all senses of the word. While there is a no more powerful lever for improving college completion and career readiness than ensuring that more students meet higher academic standards, this alone will not ensure their success.

Low-income students and other groups with historically low educational attainment frequently fall off the path to college and careers because they lack access to schools, other education experiences, and guidance to help them meet high standards and gain skills supporting persistence and advancement after high school. Like their higher-income peers, these students aspire to college and careers and understand the importance of preparing for both. However, they have fewer social connections and family members who have gone to college and can counsel them about it, and they require more financial support to pursue postsecondary education. They also need more coaching to overcome academic and other challenges and to affirm their ability to overcome later obstacles on their way to college and careers.

For such students to fully prepare for college and career, their schools and communities—and education policies—must not only focus on high academic standards but also on forging all students' connections to college and careers.

## What Does It Mean to be College and Career Ready?

The Common Core State Standards, along with the assessments and accountability systems that will ultimately drive them, are a huge step toward improving college and career readiness. They are more sophisticated and better coupled to the expectations of college and career than K-12 standards have ever been. Their emphasis on academic depth aims squarely at the bull's-eye of preparation for success after high school: “the knowledge and skills to graduate from high school prepared to succeed, without remediation, in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs.”<sup>1</sup> The process that states are undertaking to implement these standards requires significant resources and political will. It is a sea change for our decentralized education system to hold all students to a common, higher set of standards.

At the same time, states and districts will need to be intentional about developing knowledge and skills beyond those embedded in Common Core (and comparable) standards. Examples include:

- **Grit and Resilience:** the emotional and psychological resilience to persist through significant barriers and challenges.
- **Financing:** the understanding of how to marshal financial resources to support and persist through postsecondary education and training.
- **Navigation:** the knowledge and experience to navigate postsecondary education, workforce and civic institutions, and communities.
- **Transfer of Knowledge:** the know-how and ability to apply knowledge and skills in new contexts and to novel and/or practical problems.

There is nothing particularly new about these skills and abilities. David Conley has elegantly articulated a framework for “college knowledge,” many aspects of which are reflected in these categories and some in

the Common Core.<sup>2</sup> Carol Dweck and other experts in human development and resilience have long noted that the motivation and persistence to achieve is a function of belief systems about what can be learned through practice and effort.<sup>3</sup> One tenet of student-centered instruction is that deep learning, which enables the transfer of knowledge to new situations, results from the content's relevance to students' experiences and conceptions of their possible future selves. Advocates of college access and success programs know well the unrealized potential of academically ready low-income students who do not go to college or finish in good time because they lack navigational skills and guidance about college options, financial aid processes, and career paths. These important aspects of college readiness for all students are especially significant and harder to access for low-income youth.

## ***College and Career Readiness in Schools***

The elements of college readiness are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they often reinforce one another in schools. Schools that are ineffective at raising academic proficiency frequently lack a college-going culture or strong career and college focus in counseling and guidance routines. Schools with high proficiency rates tend to have a strong future orientation and often give students chances to transfer skills across different settings, for example, through internships, project-based learning, and early college experiences. They also are likely to have support systems that help students stretch to meet learning challenges, build self-efficacy, and get through the critical transition to college.

It seems fair to say that a disproportionate number of low-income and other underserved students are in schools that are weak on all counts. One indication is that about 15 percent of the nation's high schools – primarily high-poverty schools – are responsible for nearly half of the students who drop out.<sup>4</sup> And many other schools fail to give low-income students the academic or other college preparation and support needed to succeed after high school. Even in low-poverty schools, low-income, Latino, and African-American students tend to lag behind their more

affluent peers. And among students who have similar academic achievement levels, low-income students are significantly less likely to complete college than their higher-income peers.<sup>5</sup>

However, some school models and practices, emphasizing a full array of knowledge, skills, and abilities, have broken the mold and show what it takes to get underprepared students ready for college and careers.

- 270 Early College High Schools have enabled underserved students to earn a high school diploma and, on average, a year of transferable college credits – with nearly a quarter earning an associate degree by graduation.<sup>6</sup>
- The University Park Campus School in Worcester, Mass., had for years achieved high proficiency rates for its largely low-income student body, and after it instituted aggressive college counseling and transitional supports for its graduates, college success rates also improved.
- Linked Learning and Big Picture Schools have achieved higher graduation and achievement rates for underserved students by linking to students' intellectual and career interests through projects and internships. They have also formally “cross-walked,” or cross referenced and aligned the competencies emphasized in their curricula to traditional college-ready standards, such as the University of California's “a-g” college admissions course sequence.<sup>7</sup>
- Some Big Picture schools assign staff in the summer to stay in touch with graduates admitted to college to ensure they negotiate obstacles that would otherwise prevent them from showing up at college in the fall.
- In Texas, the College, Career, and Technical Academy in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo District has successfully helped hundreds of students who have dropped out of high school to get back on track to graduation and on a clear pathway to college by enticing and accelerating them with early college coursework, even while they complete a high school diploma. Dedicated staff at local community colleges also give support to the district's graduates.<sup>8</sup>



## ***Connecting More Low-Income Students to College, Careers***

Though such schools are impressive and serve notable numbers of students, most low-income students will never find themselves in one. Thus, concerted state, federal, and local initiatives and policies must take what lies at the core of successful schools and spread that to many more students, even as college- and career-ready standards are implemented.

There is one characteristic that the successful initiatives clearly share: all focus not only on high academic standards but also on connecting students to colleges and careers. They do not all connect students precisely in the same ways, but in general, their strategies include at least some if not all of the following features:

They make college-going the default expectation for all students.

They use grades 11 and 12 flexibly to accelerate students into postsecondary education and fill gaps in needed knowledge, skills, and experience.

They build transparent, accessible pathways to postsecondary credentials for all students.

Through partnerships with colleges, business, and other community organizations, they offer students experiences in and out of school to enhance academic and career preparedness.

They structure instruction and supports to help students achieve important academic and non-academic milestones in college and career readiness (e.g., FAFSA filing, college course completion).

### ***What Will It Take?***

If education leaders and policymakers recast the role of high schools to prepare and connect all students to college and careers, there are many implications for what needs to happen as states implement Common Core and other college- and career-ready standards. A comprehensive list is not the goal here, but a few obvious ideas come to mind.

Schools and their partners must have incentives to connect students. Colleges, businesses, and schools have few, if any, incentives to work together to ensure that students get connected and make an unimpeded transition to postsecondary education. For example, state accountability systems ought to reward high schools for getting low-income and minority students to complete milestones of college readiness and success (e.g., passing non-remedial college coursework as freshmen or through dual enrollment). Any performance funding for higher education ought to reward colleges that successfully reach back into high schools to prepare low-income students for enrollment in credit-bearing college courses and programs of study. Any costs of such incentives should be far outweighed by the benefits of increasing productivity across education systems: more college completers and reduced remediation rates mean fewer dollars spent per graduate.

States need more state infrastructure (e.g., data, systems, benchmarking tools, cross-walks of curricula) for education agencies and higher education officials to effectively organize, support, and monitor connections to college and careers. States have taken huge leaps in the past decade to gather and tie together key data for understanding and monitoring improvements in college readiness and success. But more work is needed across the secondary and postsecondary sectors to use these data to jointly establish goals, benchmarks, and strategies for connecting students to college and careers. Also, states will need to determine how to grant credit for college- and career-ready proficiencies learned from connecting to college and careers. For example, Linked Learning and Big Picture Schools formally cross-walked their curricula to University of California admission requirements so their students would be rewarded for successful connections to careers and project-based experiences.

Last but not least, teachers and leaders must be trained in these expectations and in innovative uses of time, pathways, instruction, and supports to connect students to college and careers. One example is to promote joint professional development of faculty teaching older high school students and those teaching entering college students – including

instructors of students taking college courses for dual credit – so they can better orchestrate students' connections to college from high school.

## Notes

1. Common Core State Standards Initiative website, <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards>
2. David Conley, *College Knowledge: What It Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2005).
3. C. S. Dweck, *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development* (Philadelphia, PA: The Psychology Press, 1999).
4. Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters, "Closing Dropout Factories: The Graduation Rate Crisis We Know and What Can Be Done About It," *Education Week* 25, no. 42 (2006): 42–43.
5. Jobs for the Future, *Optimal Solutions Analysis* (2007) of National Educational Longitudinal Study
6. JFF, "Early College High Schools Get Results," (Boston, MA: 2012) [http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/ECHS\\_get\\_results\\_040510.pdf](http://www.jff.org/sites/default/files/ECHS_get_results_040510.pdf)
7. See Linked Learning Alliance, <http://www.linkedlearning.org/what-is-linked-learning/evidence-of-effectiveness>; see Big Picture Learning, <http://www.bigpicture.org/2008/12/data-now-what-data-beyond-high-school/>
8. Lili Allen and Rebecca Wolfe, *Back on Track to College: A Texas School District Leverages State Policy to Put Dropouts on the Path to Success* (Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future, September 2010).

## Taking the Long-Term View on Teacher Evaluation

By Bill Tucker

Our nation has embarked on two critical, but possibly conflicting endeavors.

The first, teacher evaluation, long considered a perfunctory exercise in many school districts, is in the midst of a momentous change. Across the country, in almost every state, from New York and Florida to Illinois and Washington, new evaluation

systems are either under development or in the early throes of implementation. And while no state has the exact same approach, it's clear that most will use a mix of indicators, including some form of classroom observation and a standardized measure of student performance, usually so-called value-added scores—a controversial measure of the growth in student test scores from year to year that attempts to control for demographic elements. Building a new evaluation system is immensely complicated, and in the end, the result must be seen as both fair and effective. It will take time to develop the right balance.

The second endeavor presents perhaps an even bigger challenge. Forty-six states, along with the District of Columbia, have adopted the Common Core State Standards, which will potentially reframe instruction, curricula, teacher professional development, and importantly, set new expectations for both teaching and learning. And directly connected with emerging new teacher evaluation systems is the work that states are doing together in several different consortia to develop new, shared assessments.<sup>1</sup> These assessments will be aligned with the Common Core standards and are meant to replace the tests that each state currently administers separately as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In other words, states are not only figuring out how to build teacher evaluation systems based in part on student test scores, but at the same time, revamping both the tests and the standards they are based on.

Overall, the new standards and assessments are good news for both teachers and for those working to create fair and effective evaluation systems. In many states, the current standards expect teachers to cover so much content that they must race through the school year, trying to touch on everything but without the time or support to help students master anything. The new standards are meant to be "clearer, fewer, and higher," allowing teachers to go deeper and ideally, spur the development of better tools and support for teachers' practice. Related, the assessment consortia's efforts to significantly improve testing—one of the weakest and most despised aspects of our nation's current educational system—are also essential to teacher evaluation efforts. Long-term, says Douglas Harris, researcher and author of *Value-Added Measures in Education: What Every*

*Educator Needs to Know*, “value-added will work better because the student assessments used to create value-added measures will be better.”<sup>2</sup>

But in the next few years, the timing and sequencing of implementation for both new standards and assessments will impose significant challenges to teacher evaluation. “The new assessments will demand very different kinds of instruction than the current assessments have demanded,” says policy expert and former teacher Craig Jerald. For critics of current state tests, this too, is good news. If successful, these new assessments will better measure the full range of content and skills critical to student learning. But, for teachers, the implementation may be daunting. Jerald adds that the new assessments “will necessitate a massive, and massively difficult, change in instructional practices for many, if not most teachers.”<sup>3</sup>

Of particular concern for teacher evaluation is the 2014-15 school year, when the new standards and assessments are meant to be fully implemented. Take, for example, value-added measures. Since these measures use test scores from both the prior year and the current year to determine student achievement, the value-added scores will cross a major transition to new tests, new standards, new question types, a new format (i.e., online testing), and more. As Rutgers professor and testing expert Drew Gitomer explains, we don’t have data to help us understand the patterns of growth from one test to a dramatically different test the next year. If the new standards and tests meet their expectations and really are measuring different learning outcomes, “then a whole lot more needs to be understood before we simply apply value-added models to these data.”<sup>4</sup>

If today’s value-added measures are like calculating a sprinter’s improvement in the 100-meter dash across different tracks, then in spring 2015, we’ll be attempting the equivalent of calculating value-added across not only different tracks, but also racing events. And while we may be able to infer a number of things about a 100-meter sprinter’s improvement by her performance the following year in the half-mile, calculating a precise measure will be extremely difficult, at best. Scott Marion, associate director of the Center for Assessment, adds that we can’t determine the validity of value-added models across the new assessments until we have the necessary

data from the assessment field trials, slated for the 2013-14 school year. He cautions, though, that we “may have to wait until 2015.”<sup>5</sup>

But policymakers don’t have to wait. Instead of crossing their fingers and hoping that the testing experts and statisticians will somehow figure it all out, they could make a bold statement that the quality of implementation, of both the Common Core standards and the new assessments, is the most important short-term goal. Teacher evaluation systems would continue their important development and remain in effect, but for the 2014-15 school year, the use of value-added would be put on a one-year hiatus.

With this move, districts and states would dampen the inevitable and even more fractious battles around value-added, which is already under fire as a measurement instrument and will face even more questions in the 2014-15 school year. They will allow everybody to focus on implementing the new standards, enable states to make the right decisions when building the new assessments, and hopefully, lower the discord level around evaluation just a little.

This solution, of course, is not without drawbacks. Changing an evaluation framework, especially one that requires negotiation among policymakers or between unions and management, will not be easy. Some, such as Jerald, would go further, arguing that during such a dramatic shift in expectations for teachers and their work, high-stakes evaluations are a distraction from the focus on helping teachers make this transition. Conversely, there’s also the real danger that those opposed to any evaluation of teachers at all will use a one-time exception to halt or delay progress on teacher evaluations in general. Value-added measures work better with multiple years of data, so even after a year, they will not be perfect. That’s why states and districts should continue to build on observational and additional, still-developing measures, all the while focusing both evaluation and professional development to enable the instructional changes envisioned by the new Common Core standards.

The country has recognized that teacher evaluation systems must significantly improve. So, too, must our assessment systems. Evaluation proponents should have enough faith in their work and progress to avoid over-reaching. Rather than pressing the fight

for value-added onto its most treacherous terrain, supporters should step back, firm up the measure, and look to the long term. And by doing so, we will also preserve the integrity of our evaluation systems – making them stronger, not weaker.

## Notes

1. See the Center for K–12 Assessment & Performance Management (<http://k12center.org/>) for descriptions of the five federally funded assessment consortia: Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, Dynamic Learning Maps, National Center and State Collaborative, and Assessment Services Supporting English Learners Through Technology Systems.
2. Douglas Harris, in discussion with author, March 2012.
3. Craig Jerald, in discussion with author, March 2012.
4. Drew Gitomer, in discussion with author, March 2012.
5. Scott Marion, in discussion with author, March 2012.

## Leaping Forward Without Holding Schools Back

By Bryan C. Hassel and Emily Ayscue Hassel

1962. Now that would have been a perfect year for states to implement a set of standards like the Common Core and enact robust teacher evaluation systems. In 1962, the nation was on the verge of a major expansion of the federal role in schools. Our financial investment in education was about to increase substantially. We'd soon be opening the doors of all public schools to waves of previously excluded students.

And all of this would take place within a model of school organization that, we now can see, would remain pretty much the same for 50 years. First, schools would divide students into grade levels and, in the secondary years, subject-based classes. Students would progress by logging “seat time” — after a year in second grade, becoming a third-grader. After completing a year of English I, on to English II, and so forth.

Second, as a general rule, a single teacher would be assigned responsibility for each class of students. In elementary schools, each teacher would take a group of students under her wing and teach them all the core subjects. At the secondary level, each teacher would teach courses within a discipline to several classes of students each day.

With schools organized in this fashion, Common Core standards and assessments would have been advantageous. As students put in seat time to move through grade levels and courses, we could see how they were progressing toward expectations, wherever they resided.

And since students would be divided among the teaching pool, with each teacher the master of her classroom, the effectiveness of a student's particular teachers would exert an immense influence on performance. Looking back with the help of recent research, we now can see that students with teachers in the top quartile would make, by some estimates, an average of 1.5 years of growth, compared to a year of growth with the middle group of solid teachers and just 0.5 years with the least effective quartile.<sup>1</sup> Teachers would appear similarly different in their success imparting higher-order thinking skills.<sup>2</sup>

With student results tied so closely to individual teacher effectiveness, meaningful teacher evaluation would have been enormously valuable to teachers (to help them improve their craft) and to administrators (to help them make decisions about promotion, tenure, dismissal, and the like).

Fast-forward to 2012, when most states are just now putting these reforms in place. Ironically, states are finally making these moves at a moment when the basics of school organization — seat-time-based progression through grade levels and courses and the one-teacher-one-classroom model — may be set to change dramatically.

First, the explosion of digital learning is making it increasingly possible to personalize a student's educational experience.<sup>3</sup> Smart software is becoming better at guiding students through a sequence of lessons at their own pace, adapting to each student's learning strengths and challenges. This software is reaching students in full-time virtual schools, but



also through “blended learning”: brick-and-mortar schools that blend digital learning with instruction by teachers.<sup>4</sup> While challenges abound, many commentators are enthusiastic about the potential of these new models to replace seat-time-based progression with mastery- or competency-based advancement.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the one-teacher-one-classroom model appears set to change. The current set-up guarantees that only a quarter of classes—and the students within them—will be taught each year by excellent teachers, those that achieve the kind of learning growth needed to close achievement gaps and help students leap ahead. It also offers few opportunities for teachers to learn on the job in the way most professionals do—by working in teams under the leadership of excellent performers.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, a new set of models has the potential to “extend the reach” of excellent teachers, vastly expanding the number of students with access to top teaching and providing much greater opportunities for all teachers to develop and advance. Using job redesign and technology, these models all break from the one-teacher-one-classroom approach in various ways:<sup>7</sup>

- **Multi-classroom leadership:** Instructional teams report to excellent teachers with leadership skills. The teacher-leaders are fully accountable for multiple classrooms, and they both teach and lead other team members – developing their skills while achieving immediate excellence.
- **Specialization:** Excellent teachers specialize in high-priority subjects and the most crucial, challenging roles, focusing on the subjects and instructional roles in which they excel. Teammates take care of other teaching and non-instructional tasks while developing their skills.
- **Remote teaching:** Schools without enough excellent teachers enlist accountable, remote teachers, who use technology to provide live, but not in-person, instruction. Remotely located teachers collaborate with other teachers and on-site learning coaches, who develop the whole child.
- **Time-technology swaps:** Digital instruction replaces enough excellent teacher time that the best teachers can teach more students and focus

their time on higher-order learning. Teammates take care of students during digital learning and provide tutoring as assigned by lead teachers.

It’s the combination of other new staffing models with time-technology swaps that holds the most promise. Because excellent learning requires so much more than accurate instruction, just giving students digital tools within the current staffing model—or with no accountable teacher at all—isn’t likely to change outcomes dramatically. And job redesign alone, without using technology, limits teachers’ reach, recouped planning time, and economic benefits to teachers and schools. But if schools use technology to extend the reach of excellent teachers, students will gain the double benefit of personalized digital learning and the motivating, life-changing value of having excellent teachers. Schools can pay these teachers more and in many cases give them more planning time, too.

But here’s the challenge. As states move to implement the Common Core and new teacher evaluation models, they are quite naturally building these new systems for the world of schools we all know. Common Core standards mirror today’s grade-by-grade and course-by-course progressions. Many commentators worry that Common Core assessments will thus maintain the status quo: focusing on a year of seat time and missing the chance to create new, mastery-based measures.<sup>8</sup>

New teacher evaluation systems also seem designed for today’s one-teacher-one-classroom set-up. The qualitative side of the new systems—the part based on observing teachers at work—generally rests on rubrics of teacher practice in which a teacher has sole responsibility for a class of students. Quite naturally, they don’t rate teachers on the competencies they would need to take on the leadership and team roles made possible by new staffing arrangements. And they arguably make it difficult for schools to organize responsibility for students differently, such as placing proven, excellent teachers in charge of multiple classrooms or making a remotely located teacher the “teacher of record” in a subject.

There’s a real danger here that promising new approaches will be strangled by systems rooted in the status quo. But, it doesn’t have to go that way. For one thing, the Common Core and rigorous teacher

evaluation could be powerful enabling tools for new models. Investors and entrepreneurs are much more likely to be attracted to a market where standards and assessments are multi-state, rather than state-by-state.<sup>9</sup> Common Core assessments should make it much easier for educators, parents, policymakers, and students to assess digital learning offerings over time and make judgments based on how well they work. And a common framework lays the foundation for use of “big data” to understand patterns, test approaches rapidly, and harness information to transform the delivery of education.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, rigorous teacher evaluation systems are a necessary, if not sufficient, underpinning of promising new staffing models. To extend the reach of excellent teachers to vastly more students, we need to know who our excellent teachers are. If we want to give all teachers the opportunity to aspire and contribute to excellence, we need strong systems of assessing practice and results.

But to avoid the potentially stifling effects of systems rooted in today’s school organization, policymakers and educators need to do more. Three guideposts can help sidestep this dilemma:

- **Iterate.** If we make one big move to new student and teacher evaluation systems and then stay there for 50 years, we’re doomed. If we commit to iteration and results, we have a much better chance of taking advantage of new models. For student testing, that means finding ways to enable on-demand assessment—a way students can show their mastery of standards at any time, rather than just at year end. And it means pushing forward efforts to assess higher-order student capabilities. A central example is the work Tom Vander Ark and the Hewlett Foundation are doing to spur a new generation of technology-enabled systems to grade essays and other higher-order performance tasks.<sup>11</sup> For teacher evaluation, iteration means continually refining measures of practice based on what correlates with student learning. It also means developing new measures that place teachers not just on a single dimension of effectiveness, but on multiple dimensions of competence that are important for the kinds of roles and career paths made possible by new staffing models.

- **Avoid squelching innovation.** Big state and district systems can iterate, but we shouldn’t count on them as the only source of innovation. Whether through charter schools or other forms of schooling, policymakers need to leave open a space for the development of school models that are radically different—and for the growth of those that are radically better. Ensuring that policies do not inhibit the kinds of models described above, in district and charter schools, is a start.

- **Create the will for excellence.** The best hedge against locking the status quo in place is giving leaders powerful incentives to pursue whatever strategies achieve the best results for students. Today, those incentives aren’t nearly powerful enough. Elsewhere, we’ve proposed boosting them by declaring a “new civil right” to an excellent teacher, and by substantially increasing the financial rewards of success for schools and teachers.<sup>12</sup>

One additional risk of the Common Core and teacher evaluation work, in fact, is ironically a diminishment of will. If these developments lead to complacency—a sense that we’ve made the big moves we need to make—the nation won’t take the next critical steps of using these tools to give every student access to an education that only a fraction now receive.

## Notes

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## Whither Technology?

By Douglas Levin and Geoffrey Fletcher

*"Never mistake a clear view for a short distance."* – Paul Saffo, Futurist

In 1996, President Bill Clinton in his State of the Union address challenged the nation to ensure – as a matter of educational equity and opportunity – that every classroom be connected to the Internet and equipped with computers, good software, and well-

trained teachers. In response, the federal government launched a concerted effort focused on wiring and equipping schools, teacher professional development, classroom-level integration of technology, and student technology literacy skills. This national strategy ultimately struggled to maintain political will and, by 2011, the Obama administration and Congress agreed that other priorities for federal education policy were greater, bringing an end to the beginning of the modern movement to employ technology as a school improvement and reform strategy.

Indeed, educators and education policymakers have had and continue to maintain a complex and fickle relationship with technology and with those who promote its use as a component of school improvement and reform strategies. Yet, as the pace of technological innovation continues to drive fundamental changes in the personal, civic, and professional lives of many Americans, it is hard to imagine how public K-12 education could be immune to its influence or why that would even be desirable, particularly in the face of a college- and career-readiness agenda, bolstered by the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. College students rely on technology for academic success and to improve personal productivity. In the workplace, everyone from mechanics to accountants to physicians depends on technology to conduct work, grow businesses, and collaborate with colleagues – both locally and globally.

Looking ahead, what is at issue is not whether technology has influenced or will influence education. Rather, the issues at hand are how, how fast, and whether this influence will help us achieve our stated goals and values for public education or something altogether different. In fact, if we, as a nation, are serious about preparing all students for college and careers, a concerted effort will be required to re-establish a shared vision for technology's role in education policy and to attend – in a systemic and sustained manner – to good implementation.

## Leveraging Technology

While some are impatient with the pace of technology adoption in K-12 education, the speed and scope of change has been remarkable by any other standard of educational transformation or reform. Investments in

school technology stemming from and spurred on by those early Clinton-era efforts have done nothing less than lay the foundation for a new and more powerful generation of technological opportunities by helping to ensure a critical mass of school computers and near universal Internet connectivity.

Indeed, the emerging work of states and districts in 2012 is fundamentally different from that arising from Clinton-era efforts. Earlier efforts were too often treated as supplemental to the ongoing work of schools, voluntarily incorporated in classrooms by individual teachers or visionary school leaders. Such efforts have proven difficult to sustain over time and to scale up across districts and states. In contrast, today's efforts represent a rethinking of core public education system functions with technology as an integral component, not unlike the way the rise of spreadsheets and databases has transformed many businesses.

Consider the following:

- **The shift from print textbooks to digital instructional materials.** Within the last two years, more than a dozen states have changed policies or launched initiatives that encourage the use of digital content and, in some cases, open educational resources in lieu of traditional proprietary print textbooks. Momentum for these changes will continue to grow with the implementation of the Common Core standards in most states, making it easier for publishers of all kinds to enter the market. In addition, teachers and students are both accessing content through the Internet and creating their own.
- **The shift from paper and pencil assessments to enhanced online tests.** While some 33 states currently employ some degree of online and computer-based assessment as part of their accountability systems, new student assessments currently being developed by the Race to the Top assessment consortia are slated to be delivered wholly online by the 2014-15 school year. By employing technology-enhanced items, such as those that assess speaking, writing, mathematical understanding, and other higher-order skills, the implementation of these new assessments will serve to reinforce and assess student mastery of the high expectations embedded in the Common

Core standards in ways that are not possible via current generations of student assessments.

- **The shift from face-to-face workshops to online professional development.** While schools have been much slower to adopt the use of Internet-based materials for professional development than they have for student instruction, face-to-face professional development is expensive, and research clearly shows that one-day workshops do not change teacher behavior in the classroom. However, if educators have ongoing access to the Internet, they have a variety of resources from lesson plans and videos of best practices to podcasts from experts and online courses. Perhaps more important, they have access to each other.
- **The rise of “big data” in informing educational decision-making.** In contrast to other major technology-driven shifts in core education system functions, the rise of data-driven decision-making systems is fundamentally a new opportunity that technology brings to the table. Smart systems will ensure the alignment and continuous improvement of digital instructional materials, assessments, and professional development, while also providing information – in some cases for the first time ever – on the use and effectiveness of those materials in fulfilling their purpose.

While the future is bright for the growth of online and blended learning solutions and new school models – and for the related, but broader movement toward competency-based education – the speed and path to broad adoption is much less certain over the next three to five years. In contrast, the shift to digital content, online assessment, online professional development, and enhanced data analytics – all in service of improved student learning – is relatively straightforward, well under way, and easily scalable.

## ***An Obligation and Responsibility to Manage Change***

Given the broader context for education reform and improvement (especially to the unique circumstance of Common Core standards adoption), states and districts are faced with a basic, but far-reaching choice: to manage and plan for the full range of these digital opportunities in the context of stated goals



and values for public education or not. By choosing not to attend to how, how fast, and in what sequence such shifts in state and district education systems are being made, implementation efforts will be piecemeal and severely challenged, costs could dramatically increase, inequities will undoubtedly grow, and basic public stewardship responsibilities could be ceded to those with mixed motivations.

To manage the shift to digital solutions, educators and leaders must:

- **Coordinate strategic and long-range technology planning efforts within and across state and district agencies and functions.** The shift to digital solutions entails the reimagining and reinventing of core education functions – teaching and learning, instructional materials, assessment, professional development, and school operations – across the full-range of students served in public schools. Everyone has a stake in this work, education leaders most of all.
- **Establish or leverage existing vehicles for ongoing public-private dialogue and cooperation.** It is not the primary role or expertise of schools to develop new technologies or applications, just as it is not the primary role of the private sector to steward the care and well-being of students in loco parentis. An open, cross-sector dialogue is critical to sound educational decision-making and the fostering of a robust marketplace of products and services of value to schools. In so doing, states and districts will need internal capacity and honest broker advice to fairly evaluate vendor claims.
- **Ensure student and educator computer and broadband access.** As we shift to treating technology as core, instead of supplemental, to the school experience, states and districts have an obligation to muster the political will to ensure students and educators have access to computers and broadband. Just as states today are obligated to provide resources for an adequate basic education, providing access to digital devices and robust broadband (in and out of school) will no longer be optional as core education functions – from instructional materials to student assessment to teacher professional development – shift to digital and online platforms. Aggregating demand

within and across districts and states – and with other public institutions – is likely to be an effective strategy to managing costs.

- **Unlock and repurpose existing funding streams, while – with federal support – increasing investments in school infrastructure.** The shift to digital will require the repurposing of existing funding streams and new money; nonetheless, especially in difficult budget times, the federal government's support will be critical to success. While substituting, for instance, computers and open educational resources for print textbooks can save costs, districts and schools will incur new costs, such as broadband infrastructure upgrades and technical support, during and after the transition.

The forces driving education's digital shift are strong and gaining momentum. The real technology question we may be facing is how serious we are about the current school improvement and reform movement. Can we muster the political will to accelerate these forces, or will they be stalled by inertia and allegiance to the status quo? The answer to that question will go a long way to determining how quickly students will graduate high school college and career ready.

## Getting Results With Limited Resources

By Allan Odden

For more than 30 years, the United States has been engaged in education reform efforts designed to dramatically boost student performance and close achievement gaps linked to poverty and ethnicity, as a way to provide individuals with better opportunities to compete in the knowledge-based global economy and have satisfying social and family lives. Today's version of these efforts is not something brand new but merely a more explicit evolution of expectations dating from the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report. Current education reforms, e.g., Common Core State Standards, Race to the Top, ESEA waivers, educator effectiveness, turnaround schools, seek to provide a college- and career-ready curriculum to all students, ensure there is an effective teacher in every classroom and effective principal in every school, and hold

educators accountable for producing these results—or at least significant growth toward them.

To be sure, today's education reform expectations, along with the new federal and state initiatives to help schools meet them, are unfolding in an era when money for schools is in short supply. Education systems with greater resources—many in the Northeast, as well as in states like North Dakota and Wyoming that continue to benefit from oil, gas, and coal extraction fees—are better positioned to meet these challenges. But systems like California and Texas that have cut school funding by billions even with rising student enrollments, as well as districts in other states—e.g., Maine, Mississippi, South Dakota, Washington—that were underfunded before the new education expectations emerged, are more challenged and will need to strategically redeploy the education dollars they have in order to move the student achievement needle.<sup>1</sup> If they do not and mindlessly cut budgets, education program quality as well as student learning will decline, children will be less prepared for the knowledge economy, and economic growth will be blunted.

Meeting today's goals, however, is fiscally possible, even in the face of budget cuts and the absence of any huge resource increases. Generally, educators will need to use current resources in much more impactful ways by reallocating existing resources to more effective programs, redesigning talent management systems, and engaging in real school restructuring and strategic budgeting. More specifically, it will require recruiting better talent into education, adopting effective curriculum, organizing schools in new ways, and targeting current and any new resources only to programs that work, as well as more aggressively adopting online learning systems that are half as expensive as traditional schools.<sup>2</sup>

## ***Talent Matters***

To begin, the education system needs to shift recruiting the bulk of its talent from the bottom to the top half of the talent pool. Several urban districts—Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, New York, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg—have adopted this strategy and as a result boosted student performance and reduced achievement gaps. These districts partnered with such national talent recruiting organizations

as Teach For America, TNTP, and New Leaders for New Schools, which have crafted ways to recruit the best and brightest young adults into some of the most challenged school systems. Generally, this is a no-cost strategy as it uses existing recruitment and compensation budgets to acquire more talented educators who as a group are more effective in producing student learning.

## ***Adopting Effective Curriculum Programs***

A second strategy is for schools and districts to adopt effective curriculum programs. Russ Whitehurst, the former director of the Institute for Educational Sciences, authored a 2009 article showing that some reading and math programs (e.g., Open Court Reading and Saxon Math) are much more effective than others, with the effective programs being powerful “no cost” strategies.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, “balanced literacy,” a reading approach popular across the country and within many state departments of education, is at odds with Whitehurst's recommendations, as well as the characteristics of effective reading programs that emerged from National Institute of Child Health and Human Development-sponsored research and supported by the National Reading Panel. Many students, particularly low-income students and students whose parents are less-educated, need a structured reading program that systematically teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling as well as writing, reading comprehension, and reading fluency. Since each reading and math program costs about the same, picking programs that match personal philosophy or ideology should give way to selecting reading and math programs backed by evidence on their effectiveness in boosting student learning. This strategy is particularly relevant as education systems seek to implement Common Core standards in reading and math, which expect students to learn to higher standards, become fluent readers in all core content areas, and use knowledge to think, problem solve, and analyze.

## ***Reorganizing Teaching Work***

A third no-cost strategy is restructuring teacher work. Researchers, such as Stephen Raudenbush, and practitioners, such as Richard and Rebecca DuFour, have found that teaching in isolation is the prime

reason for disparities in effective teaching within and across schools.<sup>4</sup> They further argue that organizing teachers into collaborative groups—grade level teams in elementary schools and content or course teams in secondary schools—and having those teams use student data to improve instruction is a powerful way to change school culture, improve instructional practice, spread effective instructional strategies to more classrooms, and more uniformly boost student learning. When such teams use common assessments to compare teacher impacts across classrooms and judge the effectiveness of teacher work by student performance results, the results can be stunning: large increases in student achievement and significant reductions in achievement gaps. Sanger Unified School District in California, which enrolls high percentages of students from poverty and minority backgrounds, is one of many districts that has used this strategy to dramatically boost student performance results.

Providing time for collaborative groups to work together during the school day is a major goal for the use of limited salary dollars and school time. It requires that schools have both core teachers—reading/English/language arts, math, science, history, and world language—and elective teachers in such areas as art, music, physical education, and career technical education. This staffing mix, evident in many but not all schools, allows all teachers to have some pupil-free time during the school day. It requires schools to be quite flexible about class sizes because schools with fewer resources will need larger class sizes in order to provide this staff mix. And to work, it requires principals to organize school schedules so that all teachers on each team have common pupil-free time and use the time for collaborative work. But in this fiscal trade-off, collaborative time trumps class size in terms of effectiveness and positive impact on student learning.

### ***Tapping the Power of Online Learning***

Though educators have resisted the idea that technology could “replace” educators in schools, evidence is rapidly accumulating that today’s online technologies can do just that, at least for many students. Some states, e.g., Idaho and Florida, have begun to require high school students to take at least one online course to graduate. Some state virtual

schools, e.g., Georgia and Florida, offer the full range of programs, from elementary through high school, allowing students to take a full year of schooling at half the public cost of traditional schools. Virtual charter schools, like K12 Inc. and Connections Academy, also provide the full range of education programs at half the cost of public schools. For high achievers, nearly all Advanced Placement courses are available in an online format, usually at a low cost—\$500 to \$700 per pupil—about half the costs of courses provided in brick-and-mortar schools. And Renzulli Learning, from the University of Connecticut’s Gifted and Talented Center, provides an online option for gifted and talented students at a cost to districts of just \$25 to \$35 a pupil. Blended instruction, which merges computer-based instruction with regular teachers, requires fewer teachers and thus saves resources that can be used to pay the remaining teachers a higher salary and address budget constraints.

Though online programs might not work for all students or all programs, tapping online learning opportunities is a must in this era of increased school demands and tight budgets. If schools use online learning possibilities to cut costs in some areas by 50 percent, they will be better able to face other budget constraints; not doing so will simply require them to make unnecessarily larger budget cuts.

### ***More Effective Use of Resources***

If we are to reach current education reform goals—a more effective teacher in every classroom and principal in every school, college- and career-ready curriculum, higher levels of student learning and reductions in achievement gaps—then strategic budgeting—targeting dollars to programs that provide the largest effect—is a must.

The first step is to recognize and resist the common cost-increase pressures buffeting school budgets, including demands for lower class size, more electives, and annual automatic salary increases. When resources are limited—which is the case in nearly all education systems today and in the near future—these pressures “eat up” education budgets, have limited if any impact on student learning, and restrict schools from targeting resources where they matter. Schools need help from governors, legislators,

and mayors to resist these public pressures to consume education dollars. The broader political community must set clear achievement goals in core subjects, signal that funds should first be used to maximize performance toward those goals, and publicly back school boards that “buck” public pressure to use funds in the above popular, but ineffective, ways.

The second step for districts is to have ambitious, specific student achievement goals; a plan of action to attain them; an understanding of the effectiveness and costs of each element of the plan; and a strategy for sequencing revenue use when the budget cannot fund all elements of the plan. Simulation tools can help by showing the cost trade-offs of one strategy over another, and helping school leaders view equal-cost alternatives as the precursor to selecting the more effective strategy. Simulations can help show how well-funded schools can trim back budgets while boosting student learning, as well as how underfunded schools can target resources to get the biggest student achievement bangs for the bucks they have.

Strategic budgeting requires districts and schools to be flexible about class size, reasonable in the number of periods scheduled and elective classes offered, and prudent in providing salary increases only when the budget increases. Strategic budgeting provides both core and elective teachers so that all schools can provide a full liberal arts curriculum program, but then organizes schedules in ways that allow all teachers to engage in collaborative work during the school day. Strategic budgeting provides collaborative teams with short cycle (every three to four weeks) student performance data, most of which are online adaptive systems that can be purchased from many vendors (and augmented if desired) for less than \$20 a pupil, as the focus of their collaborative work. Strategic budgeting requires using some resources for tutoring and other extra-help strategies to ensure that students struggling to meet standards have the additional instruction they need to attain those goals. And when budgets become more generous, resources for such extra help should rise before class sizes are reduced because the former has a much larger impact on student learning gains.

Finally, over the medium to long term, strategic budgeting requires changing teacher compensation.

Now that new evaluation systems score teachers to four to five effectiveness levels, salary schedules can be designed to link salary levels to effectiveness rather than years of experience. Redesigned schedules can require teachers to improve their effectiveness in teaching to earn salary increases, rather than just logging an additional year of experience or getting another degree. With such redesigned salary schedules, districts could attain a goal sought for many years—having the highest paid teachers be the most effective in producing student learning.

Teacher pensions should change from the current defined benefit programs, which provide too many teachers with high-cost early retirement (often funded with pension contributions from younger teachers who move before their pension vests), to “cash balance” programs that have states manage pension funds but align pension payouts to pension contributions and investment gains. Such pension approaches allow early or late retirement but the pension is determined by the annuity the cash balance can purchase at retirement time, which would be lower for early retirees and higher for later retirees and fully funded by contributions and investment gains.

In sum, educators can improve student learning even when budgets are tight. It will require leadership, tenacity, better talent, school reorganization, and strategic budgeting. It will be harder in places with less funding, but progress can be made in every district in the country. And without smarter use of the education dollar, school systems will decline in quality and the goals of current education reforms will not be met, with students from poverty and minority backgrounds suffering the most.

## Notes

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## As Fast as We Can, As Slow as We Must

By Benjamin Boer

During the past two years, education policy has changed at hyper speed, with dramatic overhauls of teacher and principal evaluations, the adoption and unfolding of new standards and assessments, the intensive efforts to improve struggling schools, the re-thinking of teacher and principal preparation, new data systems at every level, and more. Given the depth of the education challenge we face, that's more good news than bad. Still, change comes with challenges. Implementing an interlocking array of reforms is daunting, given the communications, capacity, and timing issues involved, as well as the mischief that opponents can create when complicated work hits inevitable snags. The question many states face is how to maintain momentum and progress in the face of knotty real-world implementation challenges.

While there are no cookie-cutter answers for how to address the issues that will arise across the country, states will be well-served to take a problem-solving attitude to the implementation work at hand and make sure appropriate problem-solving mechanisms are in place. As we wrestle with implementation in Illinois, a few key principles guide our efforts.

### *Adopt a Problem-Solving Mindset and Create a Problem-Solving Forum*

In Illinois, we recently were reminded how important a problem-solving mindset can be as we approach an important statutory deadline. By law, Illinois must train all administrators in the new teacher and educator evaluation system by September 1, 2012. As the deadline nears, many worry the state cannot hope to train 9,000 administrators. But the diverse stakeholders who sit on the state advisory panel (the

Performance Education Advisory Council) overseeing this work hashed out the issue and agreed to use an online training forum they felt was comprehensive, intensive, and thoughtful. Focusing on the ultimate goal – better training for better evaluations – opened the door for a creative solution, but having a forum (here, the advisory council) for administrators, teachers, outside advocates, and state agency leaders to work through the issue collectively and constructively was vital. Similarly, when “orphan” issues have arisen, a new Illinois P-20 Council has proved enormously helpful in making sure tough issues get addressed proactively and collaboratively.

### *Take the Long View*

The work of improving educational opportunities is urgent, by definition. But real reform is a marathon, not a sprint. It must be done well and sustained over the long haul. From the outset, it is critical to identify and understand the goals that underlie a particular policy, to bear them in mind during negotiations, and to keep them at the forefront during the critical work of implementing education policy in our schools and classrooms.

When Illinois recently submitted its bid for flexibility from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA, state leaders deliberately held firm to the timeline for a new educator evaluation system even though it did not meet the U.S. Department of Education's expectation for a speedier implementation. In the guidance issued to states contemplating a waiver request, federal officials had made clear their desire that states connect all teacher and principal evaluations to student growth by 2014-15. But in Illinois' application, state education leaders opted to honor the phased-in timeline that was negotiated and broadly supported as part of the state's 2010 Performance Evaluation Reform Act. This timeline reflects the expected release and use of new national assessments as well as the capacity and fiscal realities at play in a state that did not win Race to the Top dollars.

In Illinois, the first schools will begin the new evaluation system this fall; by 2015, half of low-income students statewide will be impacted by the new educator evaluations; and by 2016, all school districts must adhere to the new model. In responding

to the ESEA waiver, Illinois recognized that changing a delicately negotiated game mid-stream ran the risk of undermining the overall effort by disrupting agreed-upon timelines and putting pressure on districts to develop and spend money on new assessments they would only use for a year – pressure that could provoke a backlash in a cash-strapped state. So, at the possible expense of receiving a waiver this year, the state took the long view, adhering to negotiated timelines they believed would keep the state moving forward in a way that maintained the needed buy-in and enabled stronger implementation – both necessary for the long-term success of this critical reform effort.

### ***Process, Process, Process***

The process often matters as much as the outcomes when it comes to making education policy. Indeed, how a policy gets developed and supported can be critical to ensuring it ultimately becomes law.

For example, Illinois recently developed a new state report card that will be published every October for each of the state's 868 school districts and nearly 4,300 public schools. The groundwork for the final report card, which includes more relevant information in a user-friendly format, was laid in countless focus groups with parents, teachers, and community members, who shared their views on what information they needed and wanted to get in any new report card. When legislation emerged, two things happened. First, a number of constituents wanted to add in new data points. Second, some groups tried to remove a few controversial items. While some adjustments made it through, in the main, the strength of the process and depth of grass-roots input allowed sponsoring legislators to resist most eleventh-hour modifications.

### ***Communicate Early and Often***

Illinois is a vast and varied state, and the state's public school system reflects this diversity. Every day, 2.1 million students attend nearly 4,300 public

schools that span from the heart of Chicago to the southernmost tip of Illinois' rural plains. This poses clear challenges to engaging everyone in developing and implementing changes to drive improvement in our schools. But strong communication – early and often in the process – is critical to advancing policy with broad support statewide and to blunting backlash before it can begin.

Illinois joined dozens of other states in adopting the Common Core State Standards in 2010 and has worked since to prepare teachers, students, and families for the more rigorous expectations. The higher standards will pave the way to better assessments in 2014-15. These should more accurately measure whether students are ready for college and careers. But the more challenging exams likely will lead to a dip in test scores. To prepare, Illinois plans to raise the cut score required to pass the current state assessment taken by third- through eighth-graders. Because fewer students will pass and test scores will dip, it is critical to communicate the value of this change. In anticipation of the resulting confusion, Illinois education stakeholders and community groups are coming together (convened by a state advocacy group) to advertise the change and borrow a page from Tennessee's "Expect More, Achieve More" campaign. In Illinois, advocacy groups plan to alert families about the move to "Real Learning for Real Life" and show how the dip in scores will help prepare students for future success, using everything from Twitter feeds to school mailers.

Policymakers, educators, and advocates in every state confront distinct challenges as they work to ensure all students receive the high-quality education they need and deserve. This is highly complex work that draws upon an array of interlocking reforms. But it can be done well if we, as advocates, develop a problem-solving mindset and work closely with other stakeholders and allies to encourage adjustment and creative solutions, as opposed to finger-pointing, back-sliding, and public controversy. We must move as fast as we can, and as slow as we must, to make sure children benefit.

## NOTES

