Heads Up on Current Education Issues
March 2013

Heads Up comes to you as a complimentary service from the Education Commission of the States (ECS) and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and is a monthly compilation of recommended research and reading on critical public education issues.

New from ECS!

Not Your Father's Vocational Education - States are adopting new approaches to support career-readiness for students. This issue of The Progress of Education Reform clarifies how these approaches differ from Career Technical Education and career-readiness in the not-too-distant past, and identifies states that are moving forward.

Inequalities at the Starting Line: State Kindergarten Policies -- This report reviews policies across all 50 states—policies that ECS believes are significant markers in the quality of a state's kindergarten program. The kindergarten report’s findings highlight the significant diversity that exists in state kindergarten policies across and within states. The results reveal a system of providing the next generation with high-quality, full-day, everyday kindergarten that is highly unequal across the states. The goal of the report is to illustrate the implications of the presence of such diverse kindergarten policies, to raise questions about the implications of that diversity, and to encourage policymakers to consider the impact their state’s policies have on children’s future educational success.

Kindergarten Policy Characteristics - This report presents 50-state data on four kindergarten policy areas. Policy areas addressed are if districts are required to offer a kindergarten program and if so, is it full-day or half-day, if students are required to attend kindergarten, at what age a student can enter kindergarten, and at what age a student is required to attend school. The author highlights the significant variations found in kindergarten policies across states.

New from NCSL!

Interview with Paul Headlee: LESN Co-Chair - Paul Headlee is principal budget and policy analyst for the Idaho Legislative Services Office. He also serves as co-chair of the Legislative Education Staff Network. In this brief video, Paul spells out priorities for the NCSL Education Standing Committee, highlights the value of NCSL staff as policy experts and emphasizes the value of participating in the Legislative Education Staff Network.
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Charter Schools

*Student Achievement in Florida’s Charter Schools: A Comparison of the Performance of Charter School Students with Traditional Public School Students* — The authors of this report argue that charter schools offer parents and policymakers a viable option for improving education in Florida. Using student achievement data from 2011-12, the authors find that charter students outperformed traditional students in 55 of 63 proficiency comparisons. In learning gains, charters were ahead in 83 of 96 comparisons.

Source: Florida Department of Education

Common Core State Standards

*Moving Forward: A National Perspective on States’ Progress In Common Core State Standards Implementation Planning* - This study serves as a follow-up to a January 2012 Preparing for Change report, which detailed state-reported survey responses about the status of CCSS implementation planning in 2011 overall and in three key areas: teacher professional development, curriculum guides, and teacher-evaluation systems. Source: Education First and EPE Research Center

- Graduation Requirements – Science -

*Passing Through Science: The Effects of Raising Graduation Requirements in Science on Course-Taking and Academic Achievement in Chicago* - In 1997, Chicago Public Schools changed graduation requirements from one science course to three. More students were exposed to more science, but the authors find little evidence that students learned substantially more, that graduation rates declined, and the percentage of students taking advanced coursework failed to increase. The authors conclude that requiring more science was a good first step, but educators also should cultivate an engaging environment and strong academic behaviors among students. (New to the ECS Research Studies Database.)

- Leadership – Principals -

*Districts Matter: Cultivating the Principals Urban Schools Need First* — This report finds that in order for large districts to cultivate first-rate principals for all their schools, they must build a large corps of well-qualified candidates and provide effective supports for school leaders on the job. To do so, the authors argue that districts must improve pre-service training, establish selective hiring procedures that identify the best candidates, then match them to the right schools, ensuring hard-to-staff schools get quality leaders. Once hired, novice principals need mentoring and all principals need professional development throughout their careers.

Source: Wallace Foundation

- P-3 – Preschool -

*Is Indiana Ready for State-Funded Pre-K Programs? Revisited* - This Education Policy Brief revisits the evidence of the benefits and impact of prekindergarten programs as documented in the group’s 2006 report, and provides updated information on policy and program developments around the United States. Key questions are examined concerning the design of high-quality prekindergarten programs; the state’s role in oversight and financial support; and costs of targeted, high-quality programs.

Source: Center for Evaluation and Education Policy

- Parental Engagement -

*Strengthening Low-Income Families: A Research Agenda for Parenting, Relationship, and Fatherhood Programs* - In its continuing series of succinct reports on ways to make progress on critical issues, MDRC addresses what works for beleaguered young families. The report says there are two challenges for policymakers in early childhood:
helping parents create stimulating and responsive environments for their very young children, and, second, supporting fathers' engagement with their children whether or not they live with them. They give a nod to Early Head Start, the new Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, and the Healthy Marriage Promotion and Responsible Fatherhood Grants Program. Next, the authors advise continued investment backed by rigorous research, developing new approaches to supporting fathers, and informing family strengthening programs with research that is already underway.

Source: MDRC

- Postsecondary Finance -

State Higher Education Finance – FY 2012 – This report finds that public higher education is about to cross a historic threshold, in which students pay a higher percentage than do states of the operating costs of colleges. Net tuition revenue made up 47% of colleges' educational costs in 2012, an increase of more than six percentage points from the previous year.
Source: State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO)

Improving Postsecondary Education Through the Budget Process: Challenges and Opportunities – According to this report, business as usual in funding public higher education no longer is possible. The Great Recession caused state funding to retract and most public universities made up for that loss, in part, by charging more tuition. The authors argue that this has got to stop or at least slow down and offers interesting ways public universities across the country have found ways to save. Among those solutions: target funding to improve performance, create incentives for increasing access, develop transparent information on higher education spending and results so families can make more informed decisions, increase productivity and efficiency.
Source: National Association of State Budget Officers (NASBO)

- School Facilities -

The State of Our Schools 2013 - This report highlights the critical need to modernize school facilities to meet current health, safety and educational standards. The report, featuring a foreword by former President Bill Clinton, states that schools are currently facing a $271 billion deferred maintenance bill just to bring the buildings up to working order – approximately $5,450 per student and twice that to get them up to date to help students learn and keep teachers healthy.
Source: The Center for Green Schools

2013 Report Card for America's Infrastructure – The authors give school infrastructure across the country a grade of D. Because schools are a local and state responsibility, little national information is available—the U.S. Department of Education's last report was in 1999. Experts consulted estimated it would take some $270 billion to renovate and maintain today's school buildings.
Source: American Society of Civil Engineers

- Student Success -

Spread of Academic Success in a High School Social Network – The authors of this report used social network analysis to gain insight into correlations between high school students' academic progress and their friendship network. Students whose friends' average GPA were greater (or less) than their own had a higher tendency toward increasing (or decreasing) their academic ranking over time. Correlation was most significant (and had the highest level of influence) at a basic friendship level (friends, but not best friends). Correlations at acquaintance and best/close friendship levels were not as significant. (New to the ECS Research Studies Database.)
For Each and Every Child: A Strategy for Education, Equity and Excellence - A federally appointed education-equity commission has proposed a five-pronged agenda for states and the federal government to help children living in poverty and shrink the achievement gap. Recommendations for policymakers include ensuring equitable school finance systems are in place; offering high-quality early childhood education with an academic focus and mitigating poverty’s effects with broad access not only to early childhood education, but also to a range of support services necessary to promote student success and family engagement in school. 
Source: U.S. Department of Education

Do First Impressions Matter? Improvement in Early Career Teacher Effectiveness - This paper examines the extent to which measures of teacher effectiveness during the first two years reliably predicts future performance. Findings suggest that early career returns to experience may provide useful insights regarding future performance and offer opportunities to better understand how to improve teacher effectiveness. Evidence is presented not only about the predictive power of early value-added scores, but also on the limitations and imprecision of those predictions. 
Source: National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research.

Is PAR a Good Investment? Understanding the Costs and benefits of Teacher Peer Assistance and Review Programs - This study examines the costs and benefits of PAR, both financial and organizational. The authors find that PAR can save districts money through increased teacher retention and lower arbitration and dismissal costs; operates through several avenues to raise student achievement; offers organizational benefits that include building a positive organizational culture centered on instruction, improving labor-management relationships at the district and school levels, alleviating burdens on principals, and providing professional development and career opportunities for CTs; and serves to strengthen the human capital system by developing both teacher leaders and future administrators. (New to the ECS Research Studies Database)

Experimental Evidence on the Effects of Home Computers on Academic Achievement Among School Children - This report evaluates to what extent having no access to a home computer impedes student academic achievement? The authors found no effects on any educational outcomes, including grades, standardized tests, credits earned, attendance or disciplinary problems. 
Source: Institute for the Study of Labor

What is YOUR State Doing? 
Send along any information or state analyses you consider useful for your fellow legislative staffers, and we will see that it is included in the next issue of Heads Up.
Please send information to Emily Workman at eworkman@ecs.org.

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