Heads Up on Current Education Issues
March 2015

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!

2015 Early Learning and Financial Aid Seminars – June 27-29
This year, ECS is pleased to announce that there will be two back-to-back LESN seminars focused on early learning and state financial aid. The early learning seminar will kick-off on Saturday, June 27-28th and the financial aid seminar will follow mid-day Sunday, June 28-29th at the Denver Marriott City Center in Denver, CO. Registration to open in April, first come first served. All expenses paid for the seminars and the National Forum.

National Forum on Education Policy – June 29-July 1
This year’s National Forum on Education Policy -- a 50th anniversary celebration -- will be held June 29 through July 1 in Denver. Join us to network with the nation’s top education leaders, learn from expert speakers and increase your knowledge on innovative education policy from early learning to postsecondary education. All expenses will be covered for all LESN members attending the pre-conferences.

Dual Enrollment Course Content and Instructor Quality
Because dual enrollment classes tend to be taught in high schools by high school instructors, it is critical for states to ensure that course content and instructor qualifications align with those for traditional postsecondary courses, according to this new ECS report. Further, colleges must ensure high school instructors are grounded in the curriculum and have the knowledge and skills necessary to deliver postsecondary content.

ECS and experts examine state-level ELL policy
As English language learner (ELL) populations multiply, state policy leaders search for best practices to provide these students with solid academic foundations. ECS convened a group of national experts to reflect on available research, practice and state policy concerning ELLs and to make recommendations in areas where potential impact at the state level is the greatest. This report summarizes those recommendations and is accompanied by a 50-state database.

Funding for students with disabilities
Facts -- and myths -- surrounding the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are outlined in a new ECS release along with how its passage has made state policymakers think differently about how they fund their public schools.

New From NCSL!

Accountability in Private School Choice Programs
This new NCSL report explores the innovative approaches to accountability being implemented in states looking to sustain high quality private school choice programs including traditional vouchers, scholarship tax credits and education savings accounts. Finding the right balance of preserving school independence and autonomy while ensuring programs are being operated efficiently and with positive effect is a challenge facing the 24 states with private school choice programs.
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- Adult Skill Development -

Making Skills Everyone’s Business: A Call to Transform Adult Learning in the United States - In this report, seven strategies are proposed for improving conditions that create and perpetuate poor literacy, numeracy and problem solving among adults. Based on shared responsibility, they include raising awareness and transforming opportunities to assess, among several others.

Source: U.S. Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education

- Charter Schools -

Measuring Up to the Model: A Ranking of State Charter School Laws - Minnesota remained at the top of an annual list of states ranked by flexibility in charter school laws; Maryland remained last. South Carolina moved up from 16 to 10 because a new law allows multiple authorizers while Massachusetts moved down six because of new data relating to funding equity.

Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

- English Language Learners – Reading Instruction -

Effective Reading Programs for Spanish Dominant English Language Learners (ELLs) in the Elementary Grades: A Synthesis of Research - New to the ECS Research Database - When instructing English language learners, the quality of instruction matters. This conclusion is becoming increasingly accepted and is supported by a 2012 literature review of studies on reading and language instruction methods for ELLs. Researchers also identified several effective reading interventions for ELLs and found that allowing ELLs to use their language skills every day is an important part of developing reading skills.

- Postsecondary Completion -

Contribution of Two-Year Institutions to Four-Year Completions - A new report found that 46 percent of all students who completed a four-year degree had been enrolled at a two-year institution at some point in the past 10 years. Of those students, 65 percent enrolled for at least three semesters at a community college.

Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

Minding the Gap: Increasing College Persistence in Rhode Island - Although Rhode Island’s college graduation rate is higher than the national average, when state policymakers look over their shoulders, they see a looming Latino population whose graduation rates lag. This report shows achievement gaps at state colleges, lists best practices in academic and financial services and offers recommendations so Rhode Island can take a more strategic, proactive approach to increasing postsecondary achievement.

Source: Providence Children and Youth Cabinet

Doubling Graduation Rates: Three-Year Effects of CUNY’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students - The City University of New York increased graduation rates for full-time students at community colleges by offering tuition waivers, free Metro cards and comprehensive advisement. Researchers concluded the ASAP initiative was well implemented, improved student outcomes and the cost per degree was less than the control.

Source: MDRC

- School Finance – Reforms -

The Effects of School Spending on Educational and Economic Outcomes: Evidence From School Finance Reforms - New to the ECS Research Database - Does money matter? School finance reforms have raised many questions about their effects on student outcomes. Previous studies have produced conflicting results. This study looks specifically at the impact of court-ordered school finance reforms on long-term, adult outcomes.
- State Rankings and Statistics -

Rankings & Estimates: Rankings of the State 2014 and Estimates of School Statistics 2015 - The NEA's state rankings book is out and it really is a good read. For example, states with the greatest growth in enrollment from fall 2012 to fall 2013 are Nevada, Utah, Idaho and Colorado. Fifteen states experienced declines, and the greatest declines were in Michigan, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Vermont. Over the decade from 2003-04 to 2013-14, in constant dollars, average public school teacher salaries declined by 3.5 percent. 
Source: NEA

- Teaching Evaluations - Classroom Observation -

Toward Trustworthy and Transformative Classroom Observations: Progress, challenges and lessons in SREB states - An analysis of classroom observation policies in SREB states offers a look at how states frame observations, train observers, ensure quality and build a culture of educator support. It outlines recommendations on how states can move forward based on promising practices taking place in the SREB region, with a focus on creating a culture of professional support and growth. 
Source: SREB

- Teaching Quality -

Who Enters Teaching? Encouraging Evidence that the Status of Teaching is Improving - New to the ECS Research Database - A 2014 study suggests that federal, state and local efforts to improve teacher quality are working. In New York state, the SAT scores of newly certified and newly hired first-time teachers increased after the state implemented state teacher reforms in the late 1990s. Improvements were even larger for teachers in hard-to-staff subjects (such as math and science), in low-income schools, and from minority groups.

- Teacher Pensions -

Doing the Math on Teacher Pensions: How to Protect Teachers and Taxpayers - Claims of pension boards and other groups about pension plans' cost-effectiveness, fairness and flexibility are challenged in this report. The plans still are in place in 38 states and this brief includes a report card on each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, with a detailed analysis of state teacher pension policies. Alaska comes in first, Mississippi last. 
Source: NCTQ

- Technology and Rural Education -

Technology and Rural Education - To tap the potential of technology, policymakers will need to rethink the idea of education delivered within classrooms of 20 to 30 students led by a single teacher. In this paper on technology's use in rural areas, the authors recommend expanding broadband to schools lacking it, including out-of-school access; creating a corps of teachers who can digitally teach students across the state and providing districts and schools with the flexibility to develop new staffing and use of technology models. 
Source: Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho

- Transitional Kindergarten -

Transitional Kindergarten in California: Early Outreach, Enrollment, and Parent Perspectives - In 2010, California's S.B. 1381 established a new grade level for students who turned five between Sept. 2 and Dec. 2 called transitional kindergarten (TK). The first year of a two-year kindergarten experience, TK offers children learning, social and emotional development; most parents were happy. There was an economic advantage as well: full-day programs provided more hours of schooling for children, most helpful for working parents. 
Source: AIR
A State of Engagement: NASBE Study Group on Student Engagement - Backing teacher preparation and professional development that empowers staff to facilitate more engaging student experiences is only one step to creating a vibrant system; a study group also recommends: promoting measures of success that emphasize student engagement, advancing school climate guidelines conducive to engagement, revising where, when, by whom and how learning is delivered and encouraging stakeholder collaboration to meet student needs.

Source: NASBE

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.