

EDUCATION DAILY®

The education community's independent daily news service

EDUCATION REFORM

104 mayors agree to meet measurable education goals

Focus areas include dropout rate reduction, early education, after school

By Frank Wolfe

As the Obama administration brings new attention to renewing urban areas, 104 mayors nationwide have agreed to set measurable education goals to achieve over the next decade under the Mayors' Action Challenge for Children and Families, an initiative of the National League of Cities.

Many of the education goals set by mayors thus far focus on reducing the dropout rate and instituting quality early education and after-school programs — also priorities for Obama administration education officials.

“The future economic vitality of our cities and our nation depends on the investments we make in our young people,” said Savannah, Ga., Mayor Otis S. Johnson, 2009 chair of NLC's Council on Youth, Education, and Families. “We know that a failure to invest in children and families guarantees that we will pay much greater costs down the road.”

Philadelphia experience

While several cities are still developing their education goals, the mayors who have already set them are aiming at ambitious targets.

One of the most ambitious efforts is in Philadelphia, where Mayor Michael Nutter wants to slice the city's 45 percent dropout rate in half over the next five to seven years, and to double the city's 18 percent college attainment rate over the next decade. The latter goal is in keeping with Obama's vision to make the U.S. the world leader once again in the college graduation rate by 2020.

Shortly after taking office last year, Nutter created the Office of Education as a liaison with the School District of Philadelphia and its CEO, Arlene Ackerman, to improve school performance and reduce the dropout rate. The head of that office — the city's chief education officer — is Lori Shorr, the former vice president of policy and planning at the nonprofit Philadelphia Youth Network and a former K-16 curricular expert at

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Report: States increase pre-K funding, enrollment

But economy raises concerns about access, quality

By Erin Uy

In 2008, nearly all states increased enrollment in state-funded pre-K programs, and overall funding rose by 23 percent — nearly \$1 billion — over the previous year, according to a new National Institute for Early Education Research report.

However, potential impacts of the recession raise concerns among pre-K stakeholders who warn that states must still make significant progress in increasing access to and development of quality programs.

Despite an injection of stimulus monies, state pre-K budgets remain threatened, said experts at a Wednesday event marking the release of the NIEER report. They called on the federal government to play a greater role in early education funding.

“Due to the economy and declining state revenues, the immediate future of state-funded [pre-K] is uncertain,” according to the authors of *The State of Preschool 2008*, NIEER's annual assessment of state pre-K. “In most states,

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Test scores, observation can identify teacher effectiveness

By Wangui Njuguna

Consensus may be building in the education community that teacher qualifications are not predictive of teacher effectiveness, but there are reservations about judging teacher impact solely on the basis of student scores on standardized exams or a principal's classroom observation.

Experts speaking during a recent National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality webinar on teacher effectiveness suggested that combining the two data points would help develop a clearer picture of what being an effective teacher means.

An emphasis on accountability for student outcomes is moving the teacher quality discussion beyond teacher credentials needed to meet NCLB's highly qualified teacher provisions to focus more on what happens once a teacher assumes classroom responsibilities, said Douglas Harris, an assistant professor of educational policy studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Laura Goe, an associate research scientist at the Educational Testing Service.

Using both observations and achievement scores helps address limitations of each, they said.

"Whatever the measure is, you want it to be related to some real notion of teacher performance," Harris said. "I think a mixture of credentials and value-added is probably the best way to improve schools."

Imperfect models abound

The HQT versus effectiveness debate is happening in the absence of an agreed-upon definition of an effective teacher and amid widespread misunderstanding about how to best use student achievement scores to evaluate teacher performance, the experts said.

There are several unsettled issues. First, even as the HQT requirements of having a bachelor's degree and passing a content knowledge test are now considered the minimum for entry into the teaching profession, the value of a post-graduate degree has been questioned, especially in cases where the degree is not tied to content areas the educator is currently teaching.

Meanwhile, teacher observations are often criticized for lacking objective measures that re-

main constant regardless of whom is conducting the observations, the experts said.

Further, although value-added models are more subjective and allow administrators to compare teachers by looking at their individual students' growth over time with an emphasis on where the students started and where they finished, Harris said the model makes some assumption that are "probably not realistic," such as treating teachers as if they are equally effective with all types of students, and assuming that all score increases have the same value.

"We need to be looking for a path to improvement," Harris said. "Value-added doesn't do that. Value-added is helpful for determining who is doing well and to identify who needs help. But it doesn't really tell you how we get that help."

Thus, administrators should use multiple measures to evaluate teachers, the experts said.

Tests and observations?

How students are performing on standardized tests and how a teacher is producing those results should be part any definition of teacher effectiveness, Goe said.

She explained that while teacher observations exclude the student achievement piece, test scores are at the core of value-added, which may mean that a combination of the two can help administrators draw links between what teachers are actually doing in the classroom and explanations for students' achievement.

"Teachers are going to strive to improve in areas they know will count," she said. "So if you have a system that's based solely on test scores you'll get teachers who are concentrating solely on test scores."

Value-added and observations can be used to examine underlying issues, they said, such as whether teachers who receive more, or a particular kind of, professional development improve their instructional practices and therefore have better student outcomes.

The experts added that teacher observations are good for focusing on teacher impacts that may not be measured as part of NCLB accountability, including the effects of teachers who work with students in pull-out sessions.



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Federal funds available to coordinate transition services

By Mark W. Sherman

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration is offering funds to build networks for people with serious mental health conditions as they transition from child-centered programs to the world of adult services.

The five-year, \$16.8 million Healthy Transitions Initiative is an outgrowth of another SAMHSA effort, called Partnerships for Youth Transition.

OSEP contributed funds to that program and remains supportive of SAMHSA's work around transition issues, according to Diane Sondheimer, deputy chief of the Child, Adolescent and Family Branch of the Center for Mental Health Services.

"We have been in touch with OSEP again," she said in an interview. "They are probably going to be providing some in-kind technical assistance this year."

Then as now, the goal is to make sure people with serious mental health conditions access the full array of services to which adults with such needs are entitled, according to a SAMHSA request for applications.

"The unique service needs of these young adults extend beyond those of children and younger adolescents, and they differ from those of adults," the agency said. "Youth who age out of child-serving systems may have difficulty obtaining services in adult systems. They often encounter a reduction or elimination of services when services available to children and adolescents are no longer accessible to them."

The program itself will not provide services — rather, it will give states a chance to make sure the various agencies serving transition-age youth work together.

"The Healthy Transitions Initiative will create developmentally appropriate and effective youth-guided local systems of care to improve outcomes for youth and young adults with serious mental health conditions," the agency said.

Unlike in the Partnerships program, only states and tribal organizations are eligible to apply for the funds, Sondheimer says.

Complete application information is available at www.samhsa.gov/Grants/2009/sm_09_008.aspx. The deadline is May 20.

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the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Shorr quickly helped establish a Re-Engagement Center for dropouts to reconnect them to the schools and potential careers. From May last year through this January, the center referred 1,128 former dropouts to programs to receive their high school diplomas, including alternative schools with afternoon schedules and Gateway to College, where participants can gain high school and college credits. Many of the dropouts said that child care or pregnancy, family issues and a dislike of their assigned school had led them to leave school.

Shorr's "proven track record in educational policy development and in working to raise standards at the state level give me great confidence that she will provide excellent leadership in improving the education received by young people in the City of Philadelphia," Nutter said last year after appointing Shorr.

Other city initiatives

Other mayors nationwide have set ambitious goals for their cities.

- In Charleston, S.C., Mayor Joseph Riley, one of 26 founders of the NLC initiative, wants to launch an Early Childhood Scholarship Program to provide scholarships to needy families to enroll their children in quality child care and early education programs. Riley also wants to increase by 25 percent the number of community learning

centers and out-of-school time programs serving elementary-school-age children.

- Mayor Raul Salinas of Laredo, Texas, wants to establish a partnership between the city library and the Laredo Health Department to promote early literacy through parent education classes and a Mayor's Baby Book Club, and to encourage 1,000 new mothers to attend the early literacy classes.

- Like Riley and Salinas, Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels is focusing on early education and said that Seattle will provide high-quality preschool experiences to 1,398 low-income 4-year-olds so that at least 61 percent of the participating children will be assessed as school-ready by the end of this school year. Nickels also wants to increase the number of low-income 4-year-olds served per year to 1,438 starting next year and to boost the percentage of the children served who will be school-ready by the end of each year to 72 percent by the 2010-11 school year.

- In Louisville, Ky., Mayor Jerry Abramson plans on reducing the dropout rate in Jefferson County Public Schools by 50 percent in 10 years. Abramson also wants Louisville to enter the top tier among 15 competitive cities in high school graduation rates in 10 years.

- In Obama's hometown, Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago plans on creating a dedicated and coordinated funding stream to make quality after-school programs available to all youth who want them by 2012.

To view a full list of the mayors' goals, see www.mayorsforkids.org/mayors.php.

Study Hall

Report: Teacher workforce getting older

A National Commission on Teaching and America's Future study of the most recent teacher demographic data, released this week, confirmed that the teacher cohort is getting older.

The study, *The Aging Teaching Workforce: A Snapshot: Age Distribution of Public School Teachers, By State 2003-2004*, was prepared for NCTAF by Richard Ingersoll using data from the Education Department's Schools and Staffing Survey. The data was drawn from the 2003-04 survey, the most recent information available. The 2007-08 survey is still in the data collection phase.

The median age of public school teachers varies widely across the U.S., from 40.5 years old in Kentucky to 49 in West Virginia.

And while every state faces an aging teacher workforce, the trend is particularly acute in New England (Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Connecticut) and the Northwest (Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming and North Dakota), the report found.

More than 50 percent of the nation's teachers are baby boomers, meaning that the profession could lose a third of its ranks to retirement over the next four years, the NCTAF report concluded.

For more information, see www.nctaf.org/documents/NCTAFAgeDistribution408REG_000.pdf.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

PRE-K (continued from page 1)

expenditures on pre-K are entirely discretionary and therefore easier to cut than expenditures for K-12 education and other programs."

NIEER says the federal government is needed to leverage state investments and incentivize expansion and program improvements. The requests may find traction as the Obama administration has highlighted pre-K among its education priorities.

Steven Barnett, NIEER director, called for a federal commitment to double the rate of growth in state pre-K while raising state quality standards so that all 4-year-olds in the nation will have access to pre-K by 2020. His proposal includes a state spending match of up to \$2,500 for every child who is enrolled in a quality program.

While Education Secretary Arne Duncan did not specify the administration's future plans for federal support of pre-K at the report's unveiling, he highlighted the recent \$2.1 billion boost for Head Start programs in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. He added that the administration views "good, quality pre-K as an economic stimulus package."

Pre-K investments

Rising state investments in pre-K implies that state leaders agree with Duncan's sentiments. In 2008, state pre-K funding climbed to nearly \$4.6 billion. Overall investment in pre-K, which includes a range of contributions, brought funding levels up by nearly \$1 billion — to nearly \$5.2 billion total — over the prior year, according to NIEER.

The monies enabled 33 of the 38 states that offer pre-K programs to increase enrollment, which allows 24 percent of 4-year-olds and 4 percent of 3-year-olds to be served nationally.

Oklahoma remains among the model states in public access to pre-K. Nearly all children are able

to enroll in pre-K by age 4, according to NIEER.

Enrollment of 3-year-olds also continues to increase. Leading that charge is Illinois, which is the "only state committed" to serving all 3-year-olds, according to NIEER. States such as Arkansas, Vermont and New Jersey serve at least 20 percent of 3-year-olds in both general and special education programs.

Still, 12 states — including Alaska, Hawaii and Idaho — do not offer state pre-K programs, according to the report.

Quantity and quality

While NIEER praised the "impressive progress" in program growth, NIEER identified fewer states than previous years as providing sufficient funding per child to meet the organization's benchmarks for quality standards. NIEER's 10-point quality benchmarks include teacher degree certification, a child-staff ratio of 20-to-1 or lower, and execution of sufficient site monitoring.

"Most states meet a majority" of NIEER's benchmarks, according to the report, adding that nine states improved on NIEER's quality standard criteria. However, five states — three of which are home to the greatest population of preschool-age children — meet less than half of the benchmarks. The states — California, Texas and Florida — have particular issues with class size and child-staff ratio.

For example, Texas, which serves about 45 percent of its 4-year-olds, does not have any standards limiting class size or child-staff ratio for pre-K programs. California limits its child-staff ratio, but does not limit class size.

Without federal support to address the patchwork of quality and access across states, Barnett said "disparities in early education and school readiness will continue to increase, and another generation will pass without the benefits of quality pre-K for all."

To view the report, see <http://nieer.org/yearbook>.