



## **K-12 Education Reform: Implications and Opportunities for Public Colleges and Universities**

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*\*This edition of Policy Matters serves as an update to a background paper provided to AASCU member presidents and chancellors in March 2010 about the history of ESEA, major issues in the law, and higher education's role in reauthorizing the law.*

### **Context**

Nearly every student entering a postsecondary institution has been shaped by the nation's K-12 system. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 as the federal government's "definitive entry into public education."<sup>1</sup> ESEA, by and large, governs federal policy addressing K-12 education.

Since its passage, ESEA has been reauthorized numerous times, including a major revision in 1994 following the release of the groundbreaking study, *A Nation at Risk*. President George W. Bush signed into law the most recent reauthorization of ESEA in January 2002, known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Touted as the most far-reaching bipartisan education legislation ever passed by Congress, NCLB emphasized standardized assessments, local control of schools and funding tied to accountability.

Despite bipartisan support for the passage of NCLB, considerable criticism has been levied against it since its implementation. For several years, Congress has attempted to overhaul the legislation, yet there is little to show for its efforts. President Obama, however, has made reauthorizing ESEA his top education priority. The administration released *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* in March 2010 and has engaged congressional leaders in discussions in an effort to move legislation forward. While Congress has not been successful in reauthorizing ESEA since 2002, there is building momentum to pass a reauthorization bill during the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress.

Despite Congress's failure to pass federal K-12 education reform legislation, state education leaders have spearheaded reform at the state and district level. In 2009, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) joined forces with the National Governors Association (NGA) to guide states in creating a common set of academic standards for English language arts and mathematics for kindergarten through 12th grade. To date, 44 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Additionally,

in 2009 the Obama administration launched a \$4.35 billion Race to the Top (RTTT) state grant program to initiate specific K-12 education reforms. Currently, twelve states have received funding through the program, and the administration has secured more funding for the program to make additional awards.

The higher education community has largely been at the periphery of conversations around K-12 education reform. This paper will demonstrate that the higher education community not only has a role to play in the ESEA reauthorization discussions, but should be viewed as a critical partner in implementing K-12 education policy at the national, state and local level. AASCU strongly encourages institutions of higher education to take an active interest in both the reauthorization process and state implementation of the CCSS and RTTT grants.

## Background

### *ESEA Reauthorization*

The signing of ESEA in 1965 signaled the federal government's interest in improving public education for the nation's children. Since then, the federal government's role in education has grown significantly, with the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) providing funds to low-income schools, funding school libraries and setting benchmarks for teacher quality, to name a few examples. In the last two decades, the federal share of K-12 spending has increased dramatically and now accounts for roughly 8.3 percent of total K-12 spending.<sup>2</sup> During this same period, the federal government has also required increasing accountability from states and local school districts.

In 2007, Congressman George Miller (D-CA), former chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labor (Education and Labor), championed an effort to reauthorize NCLB while offering sharp criticism of the legislation as "not fair...not flexible...and not funded."<sup>3</sup> During the same session of Congress, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP), chaired by the late Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA), also held a series of hearings

addressing K-12 education reform. While progress was made toward a comprehensive overhaul of NCLB, neither chamber of Congress saw formal committee or floor action on specific legislation.

Following a campaign in which newly elected President Barack Obama promised change in education—and with a newly appointed secretary, Arne Duncan, taking the helm of the Department—discussion of reauthorizing NCLB came up again in early 2009. In September 2009, Secretary Duncan delivered a speech entitled, "Why We Can't Wait," outlining his goals for reform that included encouraging high academic standards, supporting struggling schools, closing the achievement gap, strengthening the pool of educators, reducing the dropout rate and boosting college access.<sup>4</sup> Secretary Duncan ceased referring to the law as NCLB and reverted to its original name, ESEA. The secretary recognized the importance of the K-12 pipeline in meeting one of President Obama's signature goals: By 2020, having the U.S. regain its former leadership position of boasting the highest postsecondary educational attainment rate in the world.<sup>5</sup> "We want to be first in the world again and to get there we cannot waste a minute...And so the work of reauthorizing ESEA begins in states and districts across America—among educators and policy makers, parents and community leaders. This work is as urgent as it is important," the secretary said.<sup>6</sup>

Following this speech, Secretary Duncan held a series of listening forums across the country to engage communities about their challenges and solutions in ESEA reauthorization. While the secretary was involved in these community discussions, he was also meeting regularly with the "Big Eight" leaders of the House and Senate education committees, attempting to devise a bicameral, bipartisan strategy to reauthorize ESEA.

The secretary and leaders of the House and Senate education committees were ultimately unsuccessful in reauthorizing ESEA before the close of the 111th Congress. The Education and Labor Committee made significant progress, but a packed legislative agenda following congressional elections in November

provided little time to consider a large reauthorization bill.

Since the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress was sworn in in early January 2011, Secretary Duncan and President Obama have renewed their call for ESEA reauthorization. But do the conditions exist to pass an overhaul of major education legislation? Many skeptics point to challenging dynamics, political and otherwise, as major barriers to reauthorization. The 2010 congressional elections altered the political balance on Capitol Hill. Republicans gained 63 seats in the House of Representatives, ushering in new majority leadership in that chamber. Leadership of the education committee changed, with Rep. John Kline (R-MN) taking the reins of the House Education and Workforce Committee (formerly the Education and Labor Committee), and former Chairman George Miller now serving as the Ranking Member of the committee. Of the 23 Republicans serving on the committee, 12 are freshman members. In the Senate, Democrats held on to the majority but lost six seats to the Republicans. Membership of the Senate HELP Committee changed only slightly, with Democrats losing only one seat.

During the first four months of the 112th Congress, challenging budget negotiations have illuminated the intensely partisan environment on Capitol Hill. Perhaps because of this partisanship, Congress may find it difficult to build the coalitions necessary to pass other major domestic legislation. Further, with presidential elections just 18 months away, the likelihood that this Congress will tackle a potentially divisive issue—massive education reform—is questionable. Others argue, however, that the stars have aligned for reauthorization. With leadership in the White House and Department of Education pushing for reform—and a historic investment of federal funds in state education reform through RTTT—the prospect for reauthorization appears quite favorable. Further, Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), chairman of the Senate HELP Committee, has outlined an ambitious timeline for reauthorization in the Senate, with the committee slated to take up legislation in late spring.<sup>7</sup> The top two Democrats and Republicans on the committee have been

personally engaged in discussions around ESEA reauthorization, which could lead to a productive reauthorization discussion at the committee level.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, multiple groups of members—both in the House and Senate—have developed and released principles for ESEA reauthorization. The education advocacy community has also rallied behind the call for reauthorization.

To further support the drive for reauthorization, two major national organizations have joined forces to develop and promote common academic standards—a key feature in reform efforts.

### ***Common Core State Standards and Assessment Consortia***

In early 2009, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA) joined forces to launch the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative. Together, the two organizations, with the support of 48 states and the District of Columbia, took much of 2009 to develop a set of academic standards in English language arts and mathematics for students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. This initiative is the highest-profile national effort to create rigorous, uniform academic standards aimed at preparing students across the country for success in both postsecondary education and the workplace.

The status quo prior to this initiative—and still present in those states that have not yet adopted the CCSS—has been one of varied state standards for all core academic disciplines, resulting in different academic expectations for students graduating from high schools across the country. As the education advocacy group Alliance for Excellent Education highlights, students graduating from high school in West Virginia are expected to compete in the same global economy as students graduating from high school in Washington state. In a system where all states establish their own standards, many students are put at a disadvantage; minority and low-income students, too often, are included in this group.<sup>9</sup>

In October 2009, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released a report mapping state

proficiency standards on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) achievement scale. By mapping proficiency standards on NAEP reading and math scales, NCES found that state standards varied greatly. Further, the difference between the states with the highest standards and the states with the lowest across content areas is equal to the difference in what NAEP considers “proficient” and “basic competency.” NCES also found that the variation between states, in terms of the number of students scoring as “proficient” on state assessments, can be largely attributed to the variation in rigor between state standards. This, in part, explains why fewer students pass assessments in states with higher academic standards than in states with lower proficiency standards.<sup>10</sup>

The CCSS initiative strives to hold students in all states to the same set of rigorous college- and career-ready standards, with the goal of ensuring that all students possess the content knowledge and skills necessary for success in both college and the workplace, regardless of their state of residence. This effort to develop the CCSS has been explicitly state-led. However, when the standards were released in June 2010, the Department strongly encouraged states to adopt them by including a requirement in the RTTT application for states to implement a common set of college- and career-ready standards.<sup>11</sup> State boards of education have the option of adding to the standards if, for example, existing standards are more rigorous than the common core state standards. To date, 44 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands have adopted the CCSS.

While the Department was not involved in the development of the CCSS, it has encouraged the development of strong, valid assessments aligned to academic standards. In September 2010, the Department awarded two consortia of states funding as part of the Race to the Top Assessment Fund. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortia (SBAC) were awarded \$160 million and \$170 million, respectively, to develop a new set of assessments aligned to the CCSS and designed to evaluate student achievement in English

language arts and mathematics for third grade through high school. Each consortium includes a group of governing states and participating states. PARCC is a coalition of 26 states, led by Achieve, Inc. The SBAC coalition includes 31 states.

### ***Race to the Top: Incentivized Reform***

As NGA and CCSSO have been developing a new set of standards for the country’s students, the nation has been recovering from its worst economic recession since the Great Depression. In February 2009, President Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act), aimed at stimulating job creation through the investment of billions of dollars in education, infrastructure and small businesses. The Recovery Act provided an unprecedented investment in education through the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund and the Race to the Top fund. RTTT, a \$4.35 billion investment in education, is a competitive program that funds selected states to spur innovation and reform in state K-12 education. Forty states and the District of Columbia submitted applications for the first round of RTTT, and only two states—Delaware and Tennessee—were named winners of funding for phase one. The second phase of RTTT produced 10 grant recipients, including the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio and Rhode Island.

In crafting this competitive grant program, the Department encouraged states to create conditions for major state-level education reform. RTTT application eligibility requirements led many state legislatures to pass education reform legislation. For example, some states had to remove barriers in state law to collect data across K-12 and postsecondary education and accommodate the creation of new charter schools.<sup>12</sup> The federal government, by way of RTTT, extended an enticing carrot to states to institute major education reform. And through the long-term continuing appropriations legislation for fiscal year 2011, the administration was able to secure additional funding for RTTT and plans to make additional awards. RTTT has also signaled to federal lawmakers that the administration is committed to education reform in Congress.

## Implications for Higher Education

The administration's *Blueprint for Reform* and RTTT guidelines challenge policymakers to anchor K-12 education reform in a few key areas that will significantly impact higher education. This paper addresses three key areas of reform:

1. College- and career-ready standards;
2. Strong teachers and school leaders; and
3. Accountability for teachers, leaders and preparation programs.

Despite the fact that the ESEA legislation focuses almost exclusively on programs for K-12 students, the administration's broader reform agenda, combined with the CCSS, will have widespread implications for the higher education community.

### **College- and Career-Ready Standards**

What does it mean to be college-ready? In speeches, testimony and informal discussions, Secretary Duncan routinely emphasizes the need for "graduating every student college- and career-ready."<sup>13</sup> To achieve this goal, he prescribes the adoption of rigorous and internationally benchmarked standards by all states, as set forth through the CCSS. Although the secretary has expressed no intention to require states to adopt the CCSS, he often speaks of the importance of state adoption of rigorous, college- and career-ready standards for RTTT applicants, and more broadly of the higher standards' promise for boosting student success. To date, only six states (Alaska, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Texas and Virginia) have not adopted the CCSS. In these states, the administration proposes that public institutions of higher education work with the state to develop academic standards and ensure that the upgraded standards allow students to enter a postsecondary institution without needing to complete remedial coursework.<sup>14</sup>

Success under the CCSS initiative is broadly defined. Achieve, Inc., a member of the CCSS initiative advisory board and facilitator of the PARCC assessment consortia, defines academic success under the CCSS as "being prepared for any postsecondary education or training experience... [with] the English and mathematics knowledge

and skills necessary to qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses."<sup>15</sup> The importance of assessments in evaluating college-readiness cannot be understated. Valid, well-developed assessments will evaluate students' mastery of the CCSS and their capacity to meet the academic demands of the college classroom and the skill requirements in the workplace. Both assessment consortia are working with the higher education community to ensure that the CCSS are aligned with expectations for student performance in college credit-bearing courses.

The ultimate goal of NCLB is for graduating high school students to demonstrate proficiency in core curricular areas as measured by state assessments. With the CCSS—and likely under a newly reauthorized ESEA—the administration proposes the goal that students graduate from high school college- and career-ready. Under this goal, students graduating from high school should no longer need remedial education upon entry into postsecondary education. With almost 30 percent of today's four-year college students requiring noncredit remedial coursework,<sup>16</sup> this will result in huge financial savings for students and families and will ultimately allow institutions of higher education to concentrate more on delivering core undergraduate instruction.

For higher education, the adoption of CCSS has enormous implications. AASCU is engaged in a partnership with CCSSO and the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) to further explore these implications and to support states in implementing the new standards. Presumably, more rigorous and relevant standards for high-achieving graduating high school seniors will not alter the dynamics of admissions or entry-level coursework for the most selective institutions of higher education. But for other postsecondary institutions, these higher standards may relieve resource constraints and affect admissions, placement and transfer policies for freshmen and other entering students.

However, as recently highlighted by the Center for Education Policy (CEP), higher education institutions may need to align the CCSS with their curriculum,

though few states have articulated that their public postsecondary institutions plan to do so.<sup>17</sup> Arguably, the most significant change—and the one most recognized by K-12 and higher education leaders—is the need to update teacher preparation curriculum, pedagogy and practice. In their evaluation of state progress in implementing the CCSS, CEP notes that changes in teacher preparation programs will likely precede changes in admissions, curriculum or placement policy.

### **Teachers and School Leaders**

ESEA reauthorization will not only set new standards for student achievement, but also for teachers in K-12 classrooms and teacher preparation programs. The administration has proposed major changes to federal funding of university-based teacher education programs in the fiscal year 2011 and 2012 budgets. The proposed budgets consolidate the only competitive grant program for which higher education is eligible—the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant Program (TQP)—with five other programs into one funding stream under the authority of ESEA in the Department’s budget. TQP grants support intensive partnerships between high-need school districts and postsecondary institutions to prepare highly effective teachers. Numerous research studies have shown that a rigorous clinical experience (an enhanced student teaching experience) and mentor teacher support are key to teacher effectiveness and retention.<sup>18</sup> Most notable about this proposed policy change is that institutions of higher education will no longer be the only eligible entities to apply for funds to foster cooperation and collaboration with local education agencies (LEAs). In its recommendation, the administration calls for LEAs and other nonprofit entities to be eligible to apply directly for funds. There is concern that LEAs, with limited resources at the local and state level, may not have the capacity, financial or otherwise, to replicate the TQP program in its current form. The full details of this proposal are unclear, as the administration’s *Blueprint for Reform* did not address this issue specifically. However, the president’s budget paints a troubling picture for federal funding for university-based teacher education program improvement efforts.

Also included in the administration’s fiscal year 2012 budget proposal is the creation of two new programs for teacher preparation: the Hawkins Centers for Excellence and the Presidential Teaching Fellows program.<sup>19</sup> According to budget documents, the Hawkins Centers for Excellence program is designed to recruit, prepare and retain minority educators through teacher preparation program capacity building at minority serving institutions. Although the K-12 student population has become more diverse, the teacher population has not kept pace in matching student demographics. In 2006, 18 percent of students were Latino and 17 percent black. In the same year, only six percent of teachers were Latino and eight percent black.<sup>20</sup> As the achievement gap persists between minority children and their white counterparts, diversifying the teacher population is viewed as one of many strategies for closing this gap.

The Presidential Teaching Fellows program, slated to replace the current TEACH grant program, would provide states funding to award high achieving students in high-performing teacher preparation programs up to \$10,000 for their final year in the program. In exchange for this funding, teacher candidates must commit to teaching for at least three years in a high-need school or in a high-need subject area. Also, states must commit to tracking teacher preparation programs and upgrading licensure requirements. While details are limited without legislative language, the president’s budget proposal indicates a commitment to strengthening the teaching workforce and holding teacher preparation providers to high standards.

Since his appointment, Secretary Duncan has repeatedly called for “the need for a sea-change in our schools of education.”<sup>21</sup> Schools of education across this country are “mediocre,” he says, and do not adequately prepare teachers for the challenges of today’s classroom of diverse learners with diverse needs. Schools of education—notably at AASCU institutions—have been on the road to reform for some time. They have been bolstered by the revamping of Title II in the Higher Education Act in 1998 and 2008, and by the creation of the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant Program.

Unfortunately, the administration proposes directing funds away from schools of education rather than providing federal resources to further reform and strengthen them to meet the needs of today's K-12 students. Certainly, the Hawkins Centers for Excellence is a promising proposal, but the program is yet to be fully developed or funded. The vast majority of America's future teachers will be trained at universities, in colleges of education. And the role these universities play in preparing exceptional teachers—trained to teach reading, writing, science, math and social studies, and trained to work with students with special needs—are more important than ever. Ultimately, strengthening schools of education will require a meaningful investment of federal funding.

In addition to the proposed shift in the federal government's support of university-based teacher education, the requirements for new teachers will also likely change under ESEA reauthorization. NCLB required that all teachers be highly qualified by the 2005–2006 school year. Under existing law, this means that a teacher must hold a bachelor's degree, is certified or licensed by the state in which the individual teaches, and has mastered the content that he or she is assigned to teach. Recent rhetoric by department officials and requirements for RTTT applications indicate that the emphasis for teachers' training and performance is shifting from highly qualified to highly effective. Teachers may be deemed highly effective on the basis of student learning outcomes and other factors.<sup>22</sup> New federal requirements for states regarding teacher qualifications—potentially including, for example, a performance-based assessment program—will have a tremendous effect on teacher preparation programs, the mentoring of newly hired teachers, the assessment of in-service teachers, and partnerships between local school districts and institutions of higher education.

### **Accountability**

Accountability remains central to this administration's priorities in ESEA reauthorization. The Recovery Act invested \$250 million in statewide data systems to build capacity across the states to support

sophisticated accountability tools. The RTTT application required states to implement ambitious plans in many areas, including "building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals in how they can improve their practices."<sup>23</sup> Comprehensive longitudinal data systems, tying student achievement across grade levels to teacher performance, will be the key element in any accountability provisions proposed by the administration and Congress in ESEA reauthorization.<sup>24</sup> These data systems will be used to drive state, local and classroom decision making, in addition to program evaluation. Institutions of higher education, at the end of the education pipeline, should not only expect to contribute to the development of statewide longitudinal data systems, but have their teacher preparation programs evaluated based on data analysis from these longitudinal systems.

Data on teacher performance will indicate the strengths and weaknesses of teacher education programs and better direct reform efforts. The administration's proposed Presidential Teaching Fellows program, for instance, would rely on state data that ties student performance to individual teachers and from teachers back to their preparation program to determine the most and least effective programs in a state. AASCU has consistently supported accountability provisions, including student data systems, in order to further demonstrate institutional success and to promote improvement. It should be recognized, however, that state data systems are in various stages of development.

## **Conclusion**

K-12 education reform is moving forward, and in three areas in particular—ESEA reauthorization, Race to the Top and the development of Common Core State Standards—the higher education community should expect to see major changes. There are many questions for higher education left unanswered in this march toward reform: Will college- and career-ready standards become the entry-level requirements for institutions of higher education? Will the standards developed by CCSSO and NGA really

assure college readiness? How will public institutions of higher education be held accountable for their teacher education programs? How will the teacher preparation landscape change in light of these reforms? This much is clear: ESEA reauthorization, CCSS and, to an extent, RTTT, will have great impact on public colleges and universities. These areas will affect the academic preparedness and abilities of incoming students, as well as the teacher preparation programs that institutions offer. For this reason, state colleges and universities should be considered critical partners in the development of any proposal brought before Congress to reauthorize ESEA and in plans for implementation of the CCSS and RTTT at the state level.

The Senate HELP Committee is expected to release a comprehensive ESEA reauthorization bill in late spring 2011, while the House Education and Workforce Committee is expected to consider a handful of smaller topic- or title-focused bills over the course of the year. At the same time, states will be hard at work implementing the CCSS, and the two assessment consortia will be engaging higher education as they develop the next generation of state academic assessments.

AASCU will continue to partner with congressional staff, administration officials, higher education associations and AASCU members to work toward a reauthorization that creates conditions for student success and strengthens the nation's schools of education to prepare exceptional teachers. Additionally, through a partnership with CCSSO and SHEEO, AASCU will be intimately involved in developing plans and supporting states in the implementation of the CCSS.

## Glossary of Acronyms

CCSS: Common Core State Standards  
 CCSSO: Council of Chief State School Officers  
 CEP: Center for Education Policy  
 ESEA: Elementary and Secondary Education Act  
 HELP: U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions  
 LEA: Local Education Agency

NAEP: National Assessment of Educational Progress  
 NCES: National Center for Education Statistics  
 NCLB: No Child Left Behind Act (reauthorization of ESEA in 2002)  
 NGA: National Governors Association  
 RTTT: Race to the Top  
 SHEEO: State Higher Education Executive Officers

## Endnotes

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