

## Students

### Preschool Education

Publicly supported, high-quality preschool education is among the most successful and well-documented of education reforms. Four out of every five states provide preschool in some format or for some students, and nearly 75 percent of four year olds and just over half of three year olds have some form of preschool experience, ranging from day-care to high-quality educational programs. However, in inflation adjusted dollars, overall funding per child served is lower than a decade ago.

Preschool Education Main Takeaways:

- Investment in preschool is one of the most effective reform policies. Strong, positive economic, educational and social returns are well documented.
- Universal access is superior to targeted enrollment, as it reaches needy children from all walks of life.
- Successful preschool programs depend on the quality of the program. States should develop and monitor early education standards.

### Dropout Prevention

Dropouts are, without a doubt, an important social, economic and educational issue. Life chances for steady employment and a living wage are dramatically lower for those without a high school diploma. The average high school graduate earned \$42,000 in 2008 while the average dropout's salary was \$23,000. Graduates also have higher employment rates, better health histories and lower incarceration rates.

Dropout Prevention Main Takeaways:

- Because most dropout risk factors are centered outside the school, it is vital for schools to coordinate with social and health agencies to address the underlying core causes. Multiple risk factors must be addressed with multiple strategies, focused on students' personal assets and on skill building, academic support, family outreach and environmental change.
- Implement high-quality early education programs, which have been shown to reduce dropouts as well as improve a broad range of social, economic and educational factors.
- Educators must be trained to spot and report dropout warning signs such as home troubles, absenteeism, social difficulties, disengagement, and poor grades, in order to initiate vital early reporting and intervention strategies. English Language Learners (ELL) and Parental Involvement.

### English Language Learners and Parental Involvement

The education of all children is imperative for the well-being of a democratic society. Yet, our non-English speaking populations are often denied equal educational opportunities. Children from Spanish-speaking families in particular have consistently scored below the children of native-English speakers. Further, a number of school finance adequacy studies and court decisions have pointed to inequities in state funding systems that discount the unique needs of English Language Learners (ELLs).

## English Language Learners Main Takeaways:

- State laws, rules and regulations should be reviewed and revised to ensure that school evaluation frameworks systemically and specifically evaluate the instructional capacity of schools with a high concentration of ELL students. A particular focus must be placed on the training and quality of staff, the adequacy of instructional materials, and the overall funding and support for ELL students.
- Provide home-school coordinators, fluent in the children's language, to enhance communications and bridge school-home cultural differences.
- Incorporate community cultural events and celebrations into school activities.

## Addressing School Environment and Safety for LGBT Students

As a simple and self-evident moral imperative, all students have the right to be free of abuse, harassment or attack. Schools must therefore create healthy, welcoming environments conducive to learning for all students. These requirements are particularly salient for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) youth, who are disproportionately at risk of an unsafe and unhealthy school environment.

### Addressing School Environment Main Takeaways:

- Adopt proactive school climate initiatives that demonstrate a commitment to inclusive policies and shared values within our pluralistic society.
- Encourage student athletes to participate in targeted programs such as initiatives addressing bullying and hate violence, as well as gay-straight alliances, safe zones, and wellness programs.
- Align classroom pedagogy with shared values and respect for differences.

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"We encourage policymakers to use these research-based strategies to help strengthen our education system," said Dr. William Mathis, NEPC's Managing Director and the author of the series. "The strategies are carefully grounded in the overall evidence base about policies and practices that truly benefit the nation's children."

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# Teachers

## Teacher Evaluation

Teachers are important, and policies mandating high-stakes evaluations of teachers are at the forefront of popular school reforms. Today's dominant approach labels teachers as effective or ineffective based in large part on a statistical analysis of students' test-score performance. Teachers judged effective are rewarded, and those found ineffective are sanctioned. While such summative evaluations can be useful, lawmakers should be wary of approaches based in large part on test scores: the error in the measurements is large — which results in many teachers being incorrectly labeled as effective or ineffective; relevant test scores are not available for the students taught by most teachers, given that only certain grade levels and subject areas are tested; and the incentives created by high-stakes use of test scores drive undesirable teaching practices such as curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test.

### Teacher Evaluation Main Takeaways:

- If the objective is improving educational practice, formative evaluations that guide a teacher's improvement provide greater benefits than summative evaluations.
- If the objective is to improve educational performance, outside school factors must also be addressed. Teacher evaluation cannot replace or compensate for these much stronger determinants of student learning.
- High-stakes evaluations based in substantial part on students' test scores narrow the curriculum by diminishing or pushing out non-tested subjects, knowledge, and skills.

# Curriculum

## Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have ardent supporters and strong critics. The actual effect of the CCSS, however, will depend much less on the standards themselves than on how they are used. Two factors are particularly crucial. The first is whether states invest in the necessary curricular and instructional resources and supports, and the second concerns the nature and use of CCSS assessments developed by the two national testing consortia.

Common Core Main Takeaways:

- The adoption of a set of standards and assessments, by themselves, is unlikely to improve learning, increase test scores, or close the achievement gap.
- The assessment consortia are currently focused on mathematics and English/language arts. Schools, districts, and states must take proactive steps to protect other vital purposes of education such as citizenship, the arts, and maximizing individual talents – as well as the sciences and social sciences. As test-based penalties have increased, the instructional attention given to non-tested areas has decreased.
- Educators and policymakers need to be aware of the significant costs in instructional materials, training and computerized testing platforms the CCSS requires. It is unlikely the federal or state governments will adequately cover these costs. For the CCSS to be meaningful depends directly on whether it is adequately supported.



## 21st Century Skills and Implications for Education

“Teaching 21st-century skills” is a commonly heard school-reform-catch-phrase. But the exhortation has very different meanings, depending on who is speaking. One prominent interpretation of “21st century skills” is reflected in the influential SCANS report (Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills), which focuses on a person’s ability and willingness to rapidly learn new skills, exercise responsibility, work as a team player, embrace cultural diversity, access and evaluate information, be creative, and practice negotiating skills. Appealing to concerns about the nation’s international economic competitiveness, the

The Obama administration presents a different perspective on 21st-century skills, often in connection with support for the Race to the Top criteria and the promotion of “career and college readiness” standards such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The president also advocated for more rigorous science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education in his State of the Union address.

21st Century Skills Main Takeaways:

- Accountability systems must allow for the demonstration of student proficiencies through a broad array of assessment methods beyond conventional test-based systems tied to a system of test-based sanctions. Formative assessment goals must be balanced with summative goals. Excessive focus on the latter narrows the curriculum, narrows learning opportunities and increases dropouts.
- Teaching in a Linked-Learning environment requires integrated, multi-discipline, experiential and interactive curricula and modes of instruction. This requires extensive re-development and new skill sets for teachers. Teacher training must include soft skills curricula along with academic and technical curricula, beginning in pre-service training. The support and involvement of educational leaders is essential.
- Cooperation between secondary and higher education must be expanded through vehicles such as joint planning groups, which could adopt admission requirements for high school students and support “dual enrollment” in college and high school.

## Moving Beyond Tracking

For several decades, researchers have documented the effects of tracking students into segregated classrooms according to perceived ability or achievement. Whether known as tracking, sorting, streaming, or ability grouping, an expansive body of literature conclusively shows tracking has been harmful, inequitable, and an unsupportable practice. Initially touted as a way of tailoring instruction to the diverse needs of students, tracking has instead become a way to stratify opportunities to learn, limiting the more beneficial opportunities to high-track students and thereby denying these benefits to lower-tracked students. This generally plays out in a discriminatory way, segregating students by race and socio-economic status.

Moving Beyond Tracking Main Takeaways:

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“The Great Lakes Center strongly believes that education reform should be based on empirically sound research and not ideology. These briefs provide policymakers with solid research-based recommendations to inform education policy” said Daniel Quinn, executive director of the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.

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- State policies should require schools and districts to identify and describe tracks and to communicate placement policies to state departments of education and to the communities they serve.
- Districts and schools should phase out curricular stratification, starting with the lowest track.
- Districts and schools should provide sustained professional development so teachers are prepared to successfully instruct all learners in heterogeneous classrooms.

## Spending

### Public Funding of School Choice

Various forms of school choice now exist across the United States: charter schools, conventional vouchers, neovouchers, magnet schools, open enrollment, and across-district choice. In addition, private schooling and home schooling have made claims for public support through methods such as tax benefits and partial enrollments. The threshold policy decision is whether public funds should be provided to choice schools, particularly to schools run by private corporations or religious institutions. Issues such as democratic governance, accountability of public funds, quality control and church/state concerns must first be carefully deliberated.

Public Funding of School Choice Main Takeaways:

- As a threshold matter, policymakers should deliberate about the advantages and disadvantages of providing public resources to financially support each type of schooling. Based on effectiveness, democratic governance, legal, financial and equality concerns, are public subsidies to a given choice option in the public interest? Only after a decision is made to provide such support do the following issues and questions come into play.
- Each conventional public school and choice school receiving public funding should operate using a uniform chart of accounts, spending and revenue definitions. Finances should be subject to regular and public audit.
- Rules and laws should guard against malfeasance and should place appropriate limits on profits and on the salaries of those running schools and management corporations.

### Effective School Expenditures

Any discussion of effective school expenditures should start with two well-established premises. First, funding and other resources are necessary but not sufficient for providing high-quality educational opportunities. Second, simply spending money does not necessarily provide better learning opportunities.

Effective School Expenditures Main Takeaways:

- The relationship between high-quality education, test scores, and the amount spent is a highly attenuated one. Test scores alone are not a valid indicator of the broad range of public education goals.
- On the expenditure side, money has different effects at different levels. As the international PISA test scores show, the amount of money allocated must pass an adequacy threshold.
- The educational investments with the best payoff are: community and social factors, early education, community schools, extended day and year, full-day kindergarten, class size, teacher quality, high needs children and categorical aid.