

Education Matters

July-August 2009

A publication of the Association of American Educators Foundation

DOES UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL IMPROVE LEARNING?

Lessons from Georgia and Oklahoma

by Lindsey Burke



With the support of President Obama, the 111th Congress will likely consider proposals to expand federal subsidies for early childhood programs. Four such proposals aim to establish taxpayer-funded universal preschool.

Proponents of universal preschool contend that offering all students the opportunity to attend publicly funded preschool programs would result in lasting improvement in students' test scores and long-term economic and societal benefits, such as reduced dependence on government programs.

A primary argument made in favor of universal preschool is that it will allow young children to enter kindergarten better prepared to learn, bolstering subsequent academic achievement. Proponents stress that early education creates a strong foundation for reading and supports cognitive and social development. Universal preschool advocacy groups contend that attending preschool increases the likelihood of earning a high school degree and reduces the likelihood of repeating a grade or being placed in a special education class.

Supporters also claim that increasing access to government-funded preschool will yield long-term economic benefits. President Obama has argued that \$1 spent on preschool can yield \$10 in long-term economic benefits by reducing crime and reliance on welfare, while boosting graduation and employment rates.

In addition to the claimed academic and economic benefits, preschool advocates predict that offering universal preschool will yield other societal benefits, such as increased family stability. Senator Schumer suggested that universal preschool will result in a reduction in teen pregnancy, smoking, and unemployment.

Examining the Evidence on Universal Preschool

How do supporters of universal preschool support their extraordinary claims? Generally, preschool advocates point to empirical evidence of small-scale preschool programs. However, a closer look at these studies casts doubt on the promised long-term benefits from government-sponsored preschool. Moreover, universal preschool advocates choose to ignore more relevant evidence, such as

the experience of states that have offered universal preschool for a substantial period of time.

Three studies of small-scale preschool programs—the Perry Preschool Project, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers Program, and the Abecedarian Preschool Project—provide the basis for many of the benefits claimed by advocates. (For more on this, visit www.heritage.org)

While supporters of universal preschool focus on the benefits of the small-scale preschool studies, empirical evidence from other preschool programs has indicated that the potential benefits of universal preschool may be overstated. In fact, researchers studying empirical evidence from preschool programs have reported that “fade-out” is a common problem, with academic benefits dissipating by the third grade. Students enrolled in programs such as Head Start often experience fade-out.

In addition to the cautionary research on fade-out, researchers also point to certain negative behavioral effects resulting from preschool attendance, including a negative impact on classroom behavior and elevated expulsion rates in pre-kin-

ergarten. In fact, preschoolers in state-funded programs are expelled at three times the rate of K-12 students nationally, with those children enrolled in full-day programs being more likely to be expelled than children in half-day programs.

A study by researchers at Stanford University and the University of California showed negative socialization in the areas of externalizing behaviors, interpersonal skills, and self-control as a result of even short periods of time spent in preschool centers. Increased expulsion rates and negative behavioral outcomes among preschool children have been linked to teacher depression and job stress.

Georgia and Oklahoma

Georgia and Oklahoma—the two states that have offered the most extensive universal preschool programs—provide informative case studies.

More than a decade after offering students universal preschool, neither Oklahoma nor Georgia has shown impressive progress in students' academic achievement, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In fact, in Oklahoma, fourth-grade reading test scores have declined since 1998 when

the state first implemented universal preschool (see chart below).

The Empirical Evidence

There is little evidence that the state-funded universal preschool program instituted in Georgia is providing lasting benefits to students, despite substantial financial investments. While research shows some gains for disadvantaged children, the positive impact of preschool has been less pronounced among the rest of the population.

A Georgetown University study of the effect of state-funded universal preschool in Oklahoma on kindergarten readiness found positive effects on letter recognition and smaller positive effects on math and spelling capacity for children entering kindergarten. However, a prior evaluation of the state preschool program in Tulsa, Oklahoma, showed statistically significant gains in language skills for black and Hispanic children but not white children.

The experiences in Georgia suggest that universal preschool has not corresponded with dramatic improvement in students' academic achievement. After years of universal preschool, fourth-graders in Georgia have seen only a seven-

point overall gain in reading.

In Oklahoma, scores have declined since the state began offering universal preschool in 1998. Oklahoma was the only state to see a significant score decrease on the NAEP fourth-grade reading assessment and is the only state to see its reading scores decline over the 15 years from 1992 though 2007 out of all of the states that participated in the fourth-grade reading test in 1992.

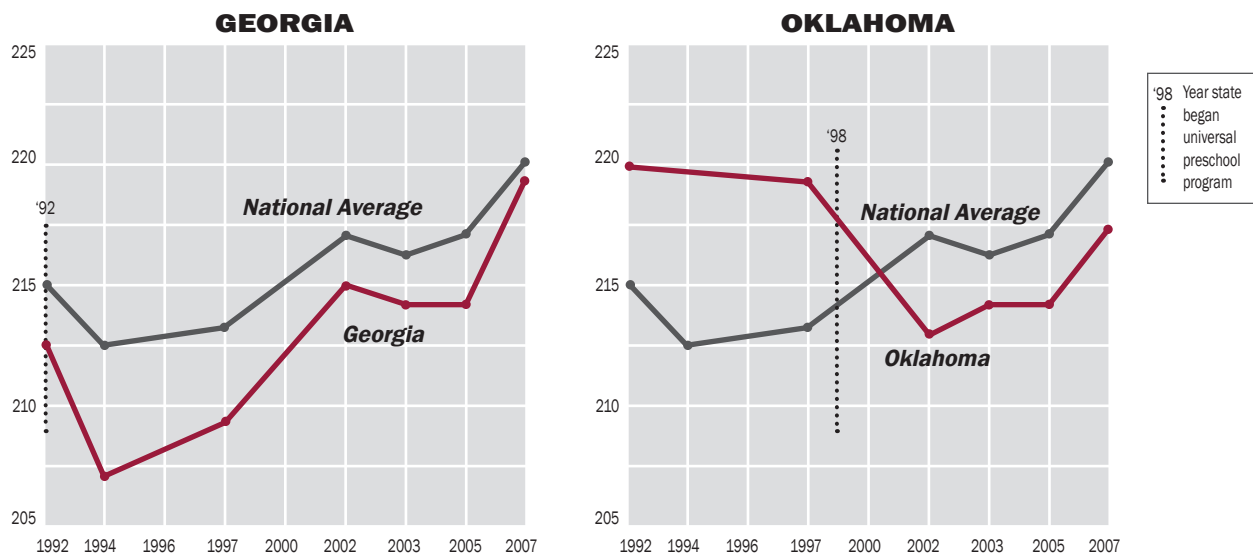
Conclusion

In his speech on education in March, President Obama declared that “Secretary Duncan will use only one test when deciding what ideas to support with your precious tax dollars: It’s not whether an idea is liberal or conservative, but whether it works.” The experiences in Georgia and Oklahoma suggest that a federal program to encourage states to offer universal preschool would be costly and ineffective in delivering the significant long-term benefits that its supporters promise. ■

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State-Funded Preschool Programs Fail to Boost Reading Test Scores

State-funded preschool programs in Georgia and Oklahoma have yielded little or no improvement in fourth-grade reading scores when compared to the national average. Fourth-grade reading scores are a first indication of the effects of state-funded preschool.



Source: “State Comparisons,” National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde/statecomp/sortingSingleYear.asp> (April 13, 2009).

Chart 1 • B 2272 • heritage.org



Writing Better

Savvy Teachers Find New Way to Combat Students' Text Messaging Habits while Gearing Up for State Exams

It's an uphill battle that teachers face every year: how to keep their students on track with their writing, especially in time for their upcoming state exams.

Shorthand text messaging habits like "Wat r u doin 2nite?" and the go-to "TTYL" have only helped to further the problem of shorthand writing. Teachers everywhere are seeing these abbreviated words, terms, and contractions used within their students' formal writing assignments.

The traditional writing process, which involves drafting, revising, and editing, often becomes too much busy work in today's world of instant-communicators. As students want to have their papers done as quickly as possible, they resort to these familiar and comfortable shortcuts. How are teachers going to combat their shorthand texting habits and get them prepared for state exams?

Savvy teachers across the nation have found a way to not only prepare their children for the exams but also cut down the time it takes to get students back into their school routine after a break. Many have turned to the School Edition of MY Access!, a web-based computer program created by Vantage Learning and currently used by over one million students in classrooms nationwide.

MY Access! gives teachers and students immediate feedback, enabling students to constantly edit and thus improve their essays. It also lets them write 10-20 times faster than by hand, improving their typing skills as well as their writing skills. Teachers can not only receive immediate feedback on students' key strengths as well as areas in need of improvement, but also prepare individualized lessons depending on student's specific shortcomings or challenges. For example, MY Access! School Edition has proven success for students in Alhambra, California, where writing scores went from 20%-70% passing on their state standard STAR exams. ■

Mixed Reviews

The public respects teachers, but not teacher unions

Debate ran high within Barack Obama's transition team over whether the next Secretary of Education should be a traditionalist in sync with the national teacher unions or a reformer who will help break the hold those unions have on Democratic Party policy. President Obama's choice of Chicago School Superintendent Arne Duncan is seen as a move to bridge those competing camps.

While 64 percent of adults said being a teacher is one of the most important jobs in our country today, two-thirds of U.S. voters (66 percent) say the teacher unions—the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers—are more interested in protecting their members' jobs than in the quality of education, according to a recent Rasmussen Reports national telephone survey.

Eighty percent of adults surveyed said their teachers were at least somewhat important in shaping the direction of their lives. However, only 23 percent of voters say educational quality comes first for the unions.

Sixty-six percent (66 percent) of voters believe the Secretary of Education should be an advocate for students rather than teachers, but 19 percent say teachers should be the secretary's priority. Fifteen percent aren't sure.

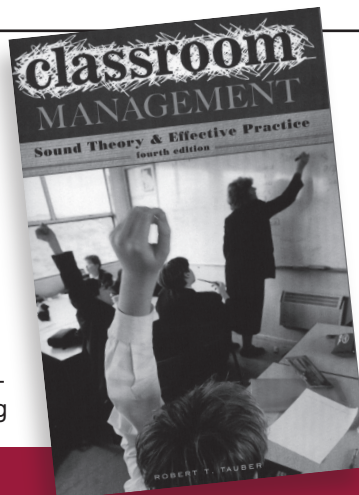
Source—Rasmussen Reports is an electronic publishing firm specializing in the collection, publication, and distribution of public opinion polling information.

Classroom Management

Sound Theory and Effective Practice

Educators need a balance between discipline theory and its practice in the classroom. This is especially important in today's educational accountability. In addition, teachers need to select, learn, and implement a discipline model that best reflects how they feel students should be treated.

Classroom Management by Dr. Robert Tauber is written for those who are new to teaching



as well as for those who are already seasoned teachers, but have had little, if any, coursework in discipline. It presents several sound frameworks readers can use to evaluate six tried-and-true discipline models. Tauber explores a number of relevant topics, some controversial, as well as how to handle problem behaviors. A chapter describes "A through Z" discipline strategies that can be immediately put into use.

Published by Greenwood Publications, Westport, CT, www.greenwood.com.

THE READING COMPREHENSION DILEMMA

A Simple Solution

By Dolores G. Hiskes

Most schools today claim to teach phonics, and initial results seem to indicate that they are doing an admirable job. First- and second-grade reading scores soar.

But subsequent comprehension issues are rampant, and by fourth grade, reading ability begins a downhill slide. This phenomena is so widespread educators have termed it “The Fourth Grade Slump.” Why such dismal results when phonics is taught?

Taking a closer look, we find that the phonics in most reading programs is hit-and-miss at best, and the practice reading is only 50 percent decodable at most, thus setting in motion an unfortunate chain of events.

In first and second grades, the stories are simple, with pictures on every page offering clues to meaning. Students are frequently given beginning and ending letters of a word which help them be even better guessers. They are also encouraged to use sentence context clues to further determine the meaning of a word, or find a word that seems to have a similar meaning.

Knowing beginning and ending letters will help you become a better guesser. And if there were picture clues, you would be an even better guesser. But by third or fourth grade, the stories are more complex, and there are fewer picture clues. And the more complex the reading, the more frequent and wild the guessing. Thus—the fourth-grade slump!

To illustrate, try reading this Russian phrase that’s only 50 percent decodable:

chocolate **бунниес**

(Hmmm. . . seven letters. Could it be “caramel, or maybe “peanuts”?)

Now try reading it again, with beginning and ending letter clues:

choc olate **бунниес**

(Ah! I know. It must be “bananas.” That begins with “b” and ends with “s” and has seven letters. It makes sense as well.)

Unfortunately, the word is not “bananas.”

When students are trained to guess and/or substitute words, they are putting meaning into, rather than extracting meaning from, the story. They are confined within the boundaries of their current vocabularies and thoughts, interpreting things only from within their own shallow perspectives. Even misreading only one or two words on a page can change the entire meaning of the story.

The New York Times had an article on June 3, 1999 about how epidemic numbers of pharmacists are misreading prescriptions, frequently confusing such words as chlorpromazine (an antipsychotic) with chlorpromamine (lowers blood sugar), with sometimes fatal results. And the makers of Celebrex (for arthritis) took out full-page ads in journals cautioning doctors to stop confusing their product with Celexa (an antidepressant).

Differences

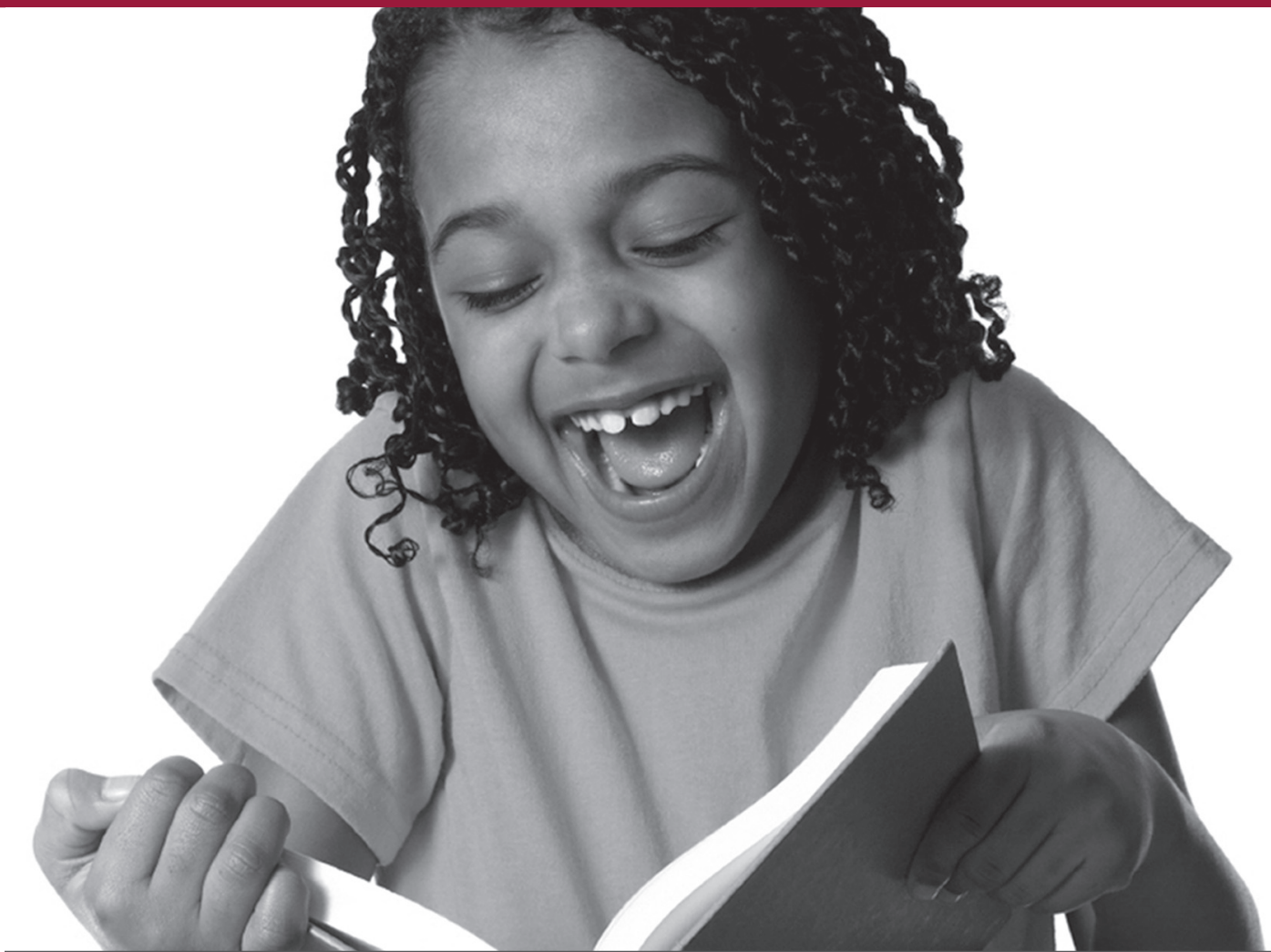
Clearly, a myriad of different problems can arise resulting from a misunderstanding or misapplication of what “phonics” really is.

Most of today’s phonics reading programs are a form of implicit phonics. Implicit phonics moves from the whole to the smallest parts. Letters and words are taught together. Words are first learned as a whole, and then broken down. Colors are frequently the first thing taught.

These programs have appealing descriptions such as “Balanced Reading Program,” “Embedded Phonics,” “Integrated Language Arts,” etc. but alas! The content belies the titles. Like Cinderella’s sisters trying on the glass slipper, the shoe simply will not fit. They are not explicit phonics.

Explicit phonics moves from the smallest parts to the whole. Letter sounds are learned first, blended into syllables, and then built into words.

Decodable reading practice should also be an integral part of this process until reading is firmly established. Just because a child knows the phonetic code does not mean he is ready to read complex and subtle literature any more than a beginning piano



student is ready to play a lovely sonata just because she knows the notes!

Now read this phrase once more, this time using explicit phonics and completely decodable text:

chocolate b u n n i e s
(Hey, it's chocolate bunnies!)

Only by knowing all of the letter sounds can this, or any text, ever be accurately read. As Mark Twain said, "The difference between right word and almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

Remedy

Fortunately this situation can be easily and inexpensively remedied without changing current classroom reading programs. With minimum adjustments and little time and effort, any reading program can be enhanced to produce truly gratifying results.

For example, one first-grade public school teacher in California supplements her regular reading program with a simple explicit phonics text and all of her first-graders read in only three months. She then has a literature evening for parents, and all thirty-two students, including ELL and dyslexic, get up on the stage and read selections from William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*.

As a district reading teacher wrote:

"Explicit phonics does not teach comprehension, but it unlocks the secrets of sound/symbol relationships, allowing comprehension to become the focus. Students, now able to read words, can meet reading at its most vital level—they can read for meaning!"

Explicit phonics is the indispensable key to fluent and accurate reading with excellent comprehension. Learning how to read logically also develops clear and precise thinking skills that spill over into other disciplines. Math frequently improves without tutoring, and critical thinking in general sharpens.

We live in uncertain times, and discretionary spending is for many of us almost nonexistent. Fortunately, with just a few free or inexpensive enhancements to your current reading program, you, too, can experience the unique joy and fulfillment that results from seeing 100 percent happy faces and starry eyes—all busy reading! ■



Dolores G. Hiskes is a reading consultant and author. She has taught reading for over 30 years, and developed unique teaching methods. She is the author of the best-selling Phonics Pathways. Dolores has a free quarterly newsletter available at www.dorbooks.com, which also features many free downloadable teaching aids. www.dorbooks.com; dor@dorbooks.com



REAL REFORM

How about an apolitical reform strategy for student success?

By Dave Saba

It has been incredibly difficult to gain momentum for the systemic change necessary for success in all of America's schools. True change requires a comprehensive strategy that focuses on the many variables that affect student performance. While many individual programs are working toward this goal, those organizations working alone will not produce the education our students deserve and require in order to be competitive in the world market.

The politics of education overshadows the merits of education change in America. The two camps have become so entrenched that many politicians determine which side they need to be on by who supports or fights against any given program. While conservatives usually focus on working toward education reform, that reform is perceived as principally revolving around school choice. As Andy Rotherham opined in a recent blog, conservatives are seen as "reflexively hostile to public schools."

On the other side, there are powerful groups that want to maintain the status quo. They have been very effective in po-

sitioning themselves as the student advocate through a comprehensive strategy to push for smaller class sizes, more spending on education in general, and higher salaries for teachers. These have the appearance of advocating for students when they really benefit the adults. A state group will work at the state level toward these goals, often with the advice and additional resources of a national group.

Meanwhile, education reform groups operate in a single silo with national leadership and maybe a state group that is advocating for a single item in the reform agenda. Each state represents a win or lose scenario for each group. But each silo really only impacts a small number of students so it is too easy to marginalize that group when compared to the entire system. Reaching a small number of students has not, and will not, induce systemic change to provide better opportunities for all students. The position from the defenders of the status quo is that each education reform does not address the larger need of all students so we should continue to stay with the current and implement their strategy.

To overcome the status quo and have more true reforms become law, state leaders and others advocating for change cannot focus on only one part of the spectrum of improvements that could have a significant positive impact on America's students. The legislative and policy focus must be to champion all strategies that will enable student success.

This approach is similar to the legisla-

tive strategy attributed to Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform. He believed that systemic change was like a crowded airport. To land at that airport your plane had to be circling in a holding pattern above. All the planes would eventually land, but you didn't really know which one would be next. But if you weren't in the pattern, you most certainly wouldn't get to land. He made sure that numerous tax break bills were introduced in every legislative session so that one or more would get approved each year. Applying this strategy to education policy will ensure that some changes are implemented each year in a larger number of states. As more reforms are implemented, more data

“The politics of education overshadows the merits of education change in America.”

will be available to demonstrate the success of these programs to new states.

Research by Matt Ladner and Dan Lips on the education agenda implemented by Governor Jeb Bush in Florida provides further evidence of how a Norquist-style approach could benefit education reform. The staggering improvements in closing the achievement gap in Florida during Bush's time as governor were brought about by increasing the number of charter schools, increasing the number of alternative teacher certification routes, and using research-based reading programs. Bush's

plan did not focus on one element but created an atmosphere of systemic change and the results demonstrate the potential success of this strategy.

Here are the critical elements of a student success strategy that can increase student achievement on standardized tests and improve graduation rates:

1. Student Experience - teacher quality, time on task and curriculum
2. School Environment
3. Accountability and Administration

All of these elements are interconnected. Quality teachers without enough time on task for students will not succeed. A longer school year with lousy teachers will not deliver success. Keeping students in a school setting that is not right for them will lead to drop-outs. Creating charter schools and opening up enrollment in private schools without enough quality teachers will lead to failure. Precise student achievement data with a weak curriculum or poor instructional quality will not raise test scores. And the list goes on.

Based on the elements that are known to improve student success at Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) schools and in Florida, what specific areas of focus should the student success agenda target?

Teaching Strategies for Student Success

Recruitment Policies

True Alternative Certification: ensure that programs are available to provide rigorous yet efficient methods for getting new teachers in the classroom.

Differentiated Pay: ensure that these opportunities are available for both high needs subject areas and for teaching in high needs school districts.

Preparation

Accountability: using the Louisiana model, determine the student achievement realized by teachers from each preparation program in the state including alternative certification programs and hold those programs accountable for performance.

Core Subject Expertise: ensure your elementary teachers have proven knowledge in research-based reading instruction and improved math expertise. Ensure secondary teachers know their subjects.

Support and Retention

Career Ladders: create a career ladder based on results—not based on inputs.

Professional Organizations: provide the ability for teachers to join a professional organization of their choice for the support they need as opposed to being forced to join a labor union.

Time on Task

Longer school year: KIPP students are in class for 197 days a year. Create longer school year for failing schools or at least eliminate meetings and functions that take teachers out of the classroom.

Curriculum

Real Math: ensure all students get basic math skills before high school / ensure high school math is not “dumbed down.”

Research-based reading instruction: if you can’t read, you can’t compete in a world market.

End Social promotion: ensure all students have the basics before advancing to the next grade.

Match School Setting to the Student: special needs, foster children, low income, military members, tax credits, public school open enrollment.

Charter Schools

Lift the cap: use waiting lists and lotteries as a strong reason to increase the number of charters in the state.

Provide full funding: give public charter schools the same funding as traditional public schools.

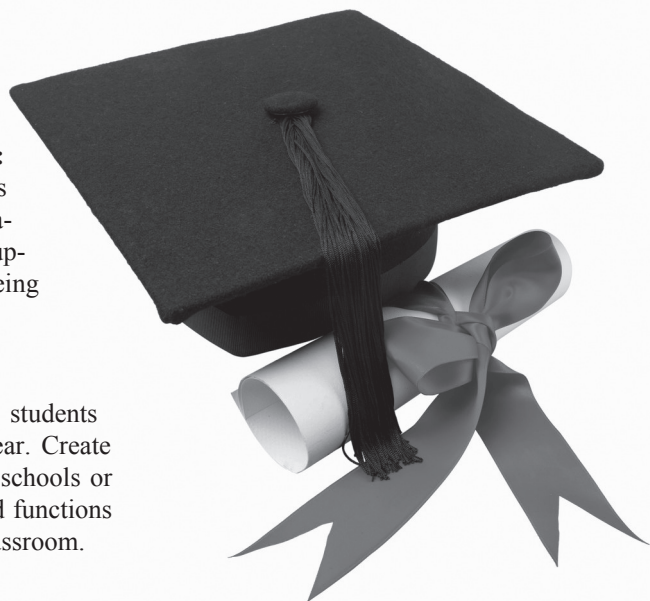
Virtual Schools

Lift any student caps: don’t limit the number of students.

Increase use for online recovery programs: allow community-based organizations to help provide access to allow students to finish high school through credit recovery programs online.

Accountability

Data Quality Campaign: each state should follow the Data Quality Campaign’s guidelines that include student identifier and teacher identifier, and can link teacher to students to determine performance.



Differentiate scoring: highlight the difference between NAEP and State Test scores to look for indications of “racing to the bottom” by lowering standards to falsely show progress.

Administration

Latitude: allow entire school districts to become home rule school districts, giving them the freedom to operate as a charter school.

Flexibility: allow teachers to “opt out” of one-size-fits-all collective bargaining contracts.

Alternatives: promote alternative principal certification to create better talent in the administrative ranks.

If we all care about student success, it is time to take charge, evolve beyond the old ways of thinking, and create a strategy for true systemic change in America’s schools. ■



Dave Saba is president of American Board of Certification and Teacher Excellence (ABCTE). He has earned recognition nationwide as a tireless advocate for finding creative solutions for teacher shortages. Dave is a Naval Academy graduate who served as a helicopter pilot in the Navy for eight years and was awarded both the Battle E and Navy Achievement Medals.



Education Matters is a publication of the Association of American Educators Foundation (AAEF)
27405 Puerta Real, Suite 230
Mission Viejo, CA 92691-6388

Presorted Standard
US Postage Paid
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