

## **The Federal Government's Role in Education**

The League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS) has embarked on a study of the Federal role in public education, pre-K through 12, limited to the issues of equity, funding and standards/assessment. This report contains information to help members prepare for further discussion of these issues at meetings in the fall. At that time, we will consider material provided by the LWVUS, including consensus questions, with the goal of reaching a new national League position.

### **I. STUDY QUESTIONS**

*Before you read the study material that follows, read these questions and jot down your answers. Our answers will provide the basis for discussion at unit meetings during the week of April 11-15, 2011 or through our online unit.*

1. If you could change one thing to improve public education in this country, what would it be?
2. According to Eugene School District 4J Superintendent George Russell one of the major roles of the Federal government in education should be to support equal opportunity and civil rights for students.
  - a. What do you think "equal opportunity" means in the context of education?
  - b. What do you think students' "civil rights" are?
  - c. Why do you agree or disagree that these two areas should be primary in the Federal government's responsibility to students?
3. Common Core Standards for Curriculum Content
  - a. What are the Core subjects?
  - b. List the advantages and disadvantages for establishing national curriculum content standards in Core subjects.
4. Race to the Top
  - a. What do think are the positive aspects in the Race to the Top initiative?
  - b. What are the possible negative aspects of it?
  - c. Some teachers' unions have expressed concerns about the use of student assessments as a primary means of evaluating teachers. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of this method?
  - d. What other factors do you think should be considered in evaluating teachers?

### **II. OVERVIEW, HISTORY AND MISSION OF U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

The following overview, history and mission of the U. S. Department of Education were taken from the website: [www2.ed.gov/about/overview/fed/role.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/fed/role.html).

#### **“Overview**

Education is primarily a State and local responsibility in the United States. It is States and communities, as well as public and private organizations of all kinds, that establish schools and colleges, develop curricula, and determine requirements for enrollment and graduation. The structure of education finance in America reflects this predominant State and local role. Of an estimated \$1.13 trillion being spent nationwide on education at all levels for school year 2010-2011, a substantial majority will come from State, local, and private sources. This is especially true at the elementary and secondary level, where about 89.2 percent of the funds will come from non-Federal sources.

“That means the Federal contribution to elementary and secondary education is a [sic] about 10.8 percent, which includes funds not only from the Department of Education (ED) but also from other Federal agencies, such as the Department of Health and Human Services' Head Start program and the Department of Agriculture's School Lunch program.

“Although ED's share of total education funding in the U.S. is relatively small, ED works hard to get a big bang for its taxpayer-provided bucks by targeting its funds where they can do the most good. This targeting reflects the historical development of the Federal role in education as a kind of ‘emergency response system,’ a means of filling gaps in State and local support for education when critical national needs arise.

### **“History**

The original Department of Education was created in 1867 to collect information on schools and teaching that would help the States establish effective school systems. While the agency's name and location within the Executive Branch have changed over the past 130 years, this early emphasis on getting information on what works in education to teachers and education policymakers continues down to the present day.

“The passage of the Second Morrill Act in 1890 gave the then-named Office of Education responsibility for administering support for the original system of land-grant colleges and universities. Vocational education became the next major area of Federal aid to schools, with the 1917 Smith-Hughes Act and the 1946 George-Barden Act focusing on agricultural, industrial, and home economics training for high school students.

“World War II led to a significant expansion of Federal support for education. The Lanham Act in 1941 and the Impact Aid laws of 1950 eased the burden on communities affected by the presence of military and other Federal installations by making payments to school districts. And in 1944, the "GI Bill" authorized postsecondary education assistance that would ultimately send nearly 8 million World War II veterans to college.

“The Cold War stimulated the first example of comprehensive Federal education legislation, when in 1958 Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in response to the Soviet launch of Sputnik. To help ensure that highly trained individuals would be available to help America compete with the Soviet Union in scientific and technical fields, the NDEA included support for loans to college students, the improvement of science, mathematics, and foreign language instruction in elementary and secondary schools, graduate fellowships, foreign language and area studies, and vocational-technical training.

“The anti-poverty and civil rights laws of the 1960s and 1970s brought about a dramatic emergence of the Department's equal access mission. The passage of laws such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which prohibited discrimination based on race, sex, and disability, respectively made civil rights enforcement a fundamental and long-lasting focus of the Department of Education. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act launched a comprehensive set of programs, including the Title I program of Federal aid to disadvantaged children to address the problems of poor urban and rural areas. And in that same year, the Higher Education Act authorized assistance for postsecondary education, including financial aid programs for needy college students.

“In 1980, Congress established the Department of Education as a Cabinet level agency. Today, ED operates programs that touch on every area and level of education. The Department's elementary and secondary programs annually serve nearly 14,000 school districts and some 56 million students attending roughly

99,000 public schools and 34,000 private schools. Department programs also provide grant, loan, and work-study assistance to more than 15 million postsecondary students.

### **“Mission**

Despite the growth of the Federal role in education, the Department never strayed far from what would become its official mission: to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.”

### **III. NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT**

“The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was enacted January 8, 2002. The NCLB Act is a standards-based education reform. It requires states to develop assessment in basic skills, to be tested at certain grade levels. Standards are set by the individual states in reading, math and writing. All students take a yearly exam, devised and/or approved by their state department of education....”

The above paragraph is taken from the report *A Picture of K-12 Public Education in Lane County* published by the League of Women Voter of Lane County in November 2009. A copy of this report can be found on the League’s website ([www.lwvlc.org](http://www.lwvlc.org)) under the Publications tab. The report also lists points made by proponents and opponents of the law and provides some statistics for student scores in local school districts.

Under NCLB, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is a measure of whether a school or district is making “annual progress” towards the academic goals established by each state. Each school and district must report their AYP on the student bodies as a whole and also by four different subgroups: economically disadvantaged, special education, limited English proficient students, and students from major racial ethnic groups. For AYP to be achieved, each subgroup must meet the expectations, and each subgroup must have at least 95% of its students tested.<sup>1</sup>

Sanctions for failing to meet AYP are imposed only on schools receiving Title I funds, which are distributed by the Federal government to schools having a student population with a high poverty rate. The sanctions become progressively more severe. If a Title I funded school does not achieve AYP by the second year, students must be given the option to transfer to another school, and special tutoring must be provided. After four years, additional corrective action can include implementing a new curriculum, replacing school staff, appointing an outside expert as advisor, or reducing the management authority of the school. After six years, the school must restructure by implementing some form of alternative governance, such as reopening as a charter school, replacing all or most of the school staff, or allowing the state or private providers to take control of the administration of the school.<sup>2</sup>

An editorial in *The Register Guard* on August 4, 2010 contains some analysis of the NCLB law. Excerpts appear below.

- “The No Child Left Behind Law is doing what it is supposed to do: goad public school systems to improve student performance as measured by the narrow but vital criteria of reading and math scores. ...They must show progress among a variety of subgroups, such as those with disabilities or those who are learning English.”
- “For the 2009-10 school year, Oregon schools showed a slight increase in student performance, with 72 percent of schools meeting or exceeding the federal standards up from 70 percent the year before.”
- “Yet as student test scores improve, the federal standards keep rising. By 2014, 100 percent of every school’s students in all subgroups must meet the standard in reading and math.”

- “Last year schools were deemed to make adequate yearly progress if 60 percent of all students achieve satisfactory scores on English and language arts tests, and 59 percent pass math tests.”
- “By 2014, when the federal standard will require a 100 percent pass rate, few if any schools will show adequate yearly progress. For some schools, the consequence will be a day of bad publicity among plenty of company. For those that receive federal Title I funds, which go to schools with high percentages of low-income students, the effects of failing to achieve adequate yearly progress will be more severe.”

#### **IV. COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS**

“The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a set of shared K-12 learning expectations for students in English-language arts and mathematics. The standards are the result of a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governor’s Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The CCSS for grades K-12 were developed in collaboration with a variety of stakeholders including content experts, state education leaders, teachers, school administrators, and parents.”<sup>3</sup>

“The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn in K-12 math and English language arts. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. The Oregon State Board of Education adopted both sets of standards on October 28, 2010.”<sup>4</sup>

The Oregon School Boards Association (OSBA) points out that these education standards were not developed by the Federal government as a new Federal mandate, but rather the states were voluntary members of the project, and, in fact, forty-seven other states and the District of Columbia have also adopted the standards.<sup>5</sup> The following Q and A’s were published to help citizens understand the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI):

##### **“Why was this Initiative started?”**

According to the sponsors, there is growing concern that every child across the country has the tools they need to succeed in college or move on to the workforce. Citing such challenges as disparate standards across states, high student mobility, increasing global competition, and the ever-changing skills needed for the jobs of today and tomorrow, the sponsors of this work engaged education stakeholders across the nation to develop these standards. Sponsors believe the work is critical to ‘prepare students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college and work,... ensure consistent expectations regardless of a student’s zip code,’... and ‘provide educators, parents, and students with clear, focused guideposts.’

##### **“What types of criteria did the Initiative use when creating the Standards?”**

According to CCSSI, the following criteria were considered when developing the standards:

- Aligned with expectations for college and career success
- Clear, so that all educators and parents know what they need to do to help their students learn
- Consistent across all states
- Include both content and the application of knowledge through high-order skills
- Build upon the strengths of state standards and standards of top-performing nations
- Realistic, for effective use in the classroom
- Create internationally benchmarked standards so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society
- Evidence and research-based criteria”<sup>6</sup>

**“Will the new Common Core State Standards replace Oregon’s existing academic standards for mathematics and English language arts?”**

Yes. These two new sets of standards will replace Oregon’s current standards in English language arts and mathematics. While the new standards are similar to Oregon’s current standards, some content has been shifted to ensure college and career readiness at the end of high school.”<sup>7</sup>

**“What is ODE doing to help schools transition to the Common Core Standards?”**

ODE has

- Convened a CCSS Implementation Task Force comprised of educators, administrators, and education stakeholders to develop a comprehensive implementation timeline, plan, and identify resources for instruction and assessment.
- Helped to establish the SMARTER Balance Assessment Consortium (SBAC) that will build a CCSS common assessment for the partner states to be implemented in school year 2014-2015
- Provided mathematics teachers with an annotated crosswalk table (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=3211>) that compares the CCSS to the current Oregon mathematics standards, illustrating what content has moved to different grade levels.
- Provided English language arts *and* subject-area teachers with the Oregon K-12 Literacy Framework (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/go/literacyframework> ) that supports implementation of the CCSS in English language arts and all other subjects. A number of states are using Oregon’s Framework for this purpose.
- Completed two new sections of the Oregon K-12 Literacy Framework (to be added soon): a Writing section comparable to Reading and an extensive Reading professional development portal for coaches and teachers.
- Provided Strand 4 Oregon DATA Project training featuring implementation of the Reading and Writing CCSS and Essential Skills using the Oregon K-12 Literacy Framework
- Collaborated with other states to provide educators with a variety of tools and resources, including shared curriculum. Collaboration is ongoing.
- Updated the mathematics achievement standards (thresholds for *meeting* and *exceeding* on the OAKS) to provide time for districts and schools to adjust to requirements of SMARTER Balance partner states prior to the 2014-2015 common assessment. <http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=3182>”<sup>8</sup>

**“When will students begin to see these changes in the classroom?”**

Students could begin seeing Common Core content as soon as next school year (2011-12). Districts will first need to work with teachers to "unpack" the standards to understand the knowledge and skills contained within each learning expectation. Teachers at each grade level need to understand what new content they are responsible for teaching at their grade-level and what is no longer in their grade-level.”<sup>9</sup>

**“What is the CCSS common assessment?”**

It is expected that states adopting the CCSS will implement a student assessment system aligned with the CCSS beginning in the 2014-15 school year. Along with 30 other states, Oregon is a member of the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) (<http://www.k12.wa.us/SMARTER/>) which has formed to create an historic assessment system. The common assessment is a natural continuation of the work already underway in Oregon and builds on our current assessment system and the work of the Oregon DATA Project. By partnering with other states, Oregon will be able to leverage resources, share expertise, and produce a system that will meet the needs and expectations of Oregon students and teachers. Until a common assessment is designed, piloted, and implemented, however, ODE will continue using the Oregon

Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS) to assess students in math, reading, writing, science, and social science.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Examples of Standards in math<sup>11</sup> and reading<sup>12</sup> from ODE:**

First grade students:

Math Standards: Work with addition and subtraction equations.

1. Understand the meaning of the equal sign, and determine if equations involving addition and subtraction are true or false. For example, which of the following equations are true and which are false?  $6 = 6$ ,  $7 = 8 - 1$ ,  $5 + 2 = 2 + 5$ ,  $4 + 1 = 5 + 2$ .
2. Determine the unknown whole number in an addition or subtraction equation relating three whole numbers. For example, determine the unknown number that makes the equation true in each of the equations  $8 + ? = 11$ ,  $5 = ? - 3$ ,  $6 + 6 = ?$

Reading Standards: Key ideas and details

1. Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
2. Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.
3. Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.

High school students:

Math Standards: Interpreting categorical and quantitative data:

1. Represent data with plots on the real number line (dot plots, histograms, and box plots).
2. Use statistics appropriate to the shape of the data distribution to compare center (median, mean) and spread (interquartile range, standard deviation) of two or more different data sets.

Reading Standards: Literacy in history/social studies for grades 11-12:

1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
3. Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

## **V. RACE TO THE TOP**

### **“Promoting Innovation, Reform, and Excellence in America’s Public Schools**

*“America will not succeed in the 21st century unless we do a far better job of educating our sons and daughters... And the race starts today. I am issuing a challenge to our nation’s governors and school boards, principals and teachers, businesses and non-profits, parents and students: if you set and enforce rigorous and challenging standards and assessments; if you put outstanding teachers at the front of the classroom; if you turn around failing schools – your state can win a Race to the Top grant that will not only help students outcompete workers around the world, but let them fulfill their God-given potential.”*

President Barack Obama

July 24, 2009 <sup>13</sup>

### **Race to the Top grants**

The \$4.35 billion Race to the Top Fund is an unprecedented Federal effort in reform. The program includes \$4 billion for statewide reform grants and \$350 million to support states working together to improve the quality of their assessments. These grants are awarded on the basis of a competitive application process. Grant winners in the first round were the states of Delaware and Tennessee. Second round winners, which

were announced in August 2010, were, in alphabetical order, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Rhode Island.

### **Race to the Top reforms**

“The Race to the Top (RTTT) emphasizes the following reform areas:

- Designing and implementing rigorous standards and high-quality assessments, by encouraging states to work jointly toward a system of common academic standards that builds toward college and career readiness, and that includes improved assessments designed to measure critical knowledge and higher-order thinking skills.
- Attracting and keeping great teachers and leaders in America’s classrooms, by expanding effective support to teachers and principals; reforming and improving teacher preparation; revising teacher evaluation, compensation, and retention policies to encourage and reward effectiveness; and working to ensure that our most talented teachers are placed in the schools and subjects where they are needed the most.
- Supporting data systems that inform decisions and improve instruction, by fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system, assessing and using data to drive instruction, and making data more accessible to key stakeholders.
- Using innovation and effective approaches to turn-around struggling schools, by asking states to prioritize and transform persistently low-performing schools.
- Demonstrating and sustaining education reform, by promoting collaborations between business leaders, educators, and other stakeholders to raise student achievement and close achievement gaps, and by expanding support for high-performing public charter schools, reinvigorating math and science education, and promoting other conditions favorable to innovation and reform.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Controversy about Race to the Top**

There are many areas of disagreement between proponents and opponents of the new Federal initiative. However, both groups recognize that the United States has fallen behind much of the rest of the world in the success of its educational system. The following are some examples of this decline.

“The U.S. ranks 29 out of 41 industrial nations in terms of educational achievement, according to Dan Weisberg of the New Teacher Project, ‘and the solution is teachers — recruiting, developing and retaining great teachers.’”<sup>15</sup> “Among industrialized nations, the U.S. has the largest gap between rich and poor and the flimsiest safety net, according to Deborah Meier, an educational reformer and founder of a network of schools.”<sup>16</sup>

### **The position of proponents**

The general consensus shared by most states and education experts is that there's much to like about Race to the Top. "If it is done right," said Randi Weingarten, president of the 1.4-million strong American Federation of Teachers, "it can promote innovation and promote promising ideas." <sup>17</sup>

Adam Gamoran, director of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, said the program makes sense in terms of the four areas, or “assurances,” that states needed to include in their applications for grant money. Those assurances are:

- improving the quality of teachers and the distribution of excellent teachers
- having standards in place to improve teaching and learning
- using longitudinal data systems to improve student and teacher performance
- making sure all students have qualified teachers and improving achievement in low-performing schools. <sup>18</sup>

### **The position of opponents**

An outspoken critic of RTTT is Diane Ravitch, author of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. She describes her view of the expected outcomes as follows: "The program contains these key elements: Teachers will be evaluated in relation to their students' test scores. Schools that continue to get low test scores will be closed or turned into charter schools or handed over to private management. In low-performing schools, principals will be fired, and all or half of the staff will be fired. States are encouraged to create many more privately managed charter schools."<sup>19</sup>

In an exchange with RTTT proponent Bill Gates on a Washington Post blog, she mentions further concerns: "I think American children need not only testing in basic skills, but an education that includes the arts, literature, the sciences, history, geography, civics, foreign languages, economics, and physical education."

"I don't hear any of the corporate reformers expressing concern about the way standardized testing narrows the curriculum, the way it rewards convergent thinking and punishes divergent thinking, the way it stamps out creativity and originality. I don't hear any of them worried that a generation will grow up ignorant of history and the workings of government. I don't hear any of them putting up \$100 million to make sure that every child has the chance to learn to play a musical instrument. All I hear from them is a demand for higher test scores and a demand to tie teachers' evaluations to those test scores. That is not going to improve education."<sup>20</sup>

### **Civil rights leaders on Race to the Top**

In a highly critical broadside issued in July 2010 against many aspects of the Obama administration's education agenda, seven civil rights groups, including the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, singled out the Race to the Top competition for its fiercest criticism:

"If education is a civil right, children in 'winning' states should not be the only ones who have the opportunity to learn to learn [sic] in high quality environments. Such an approach reinstates the antiquated and highly politicized frame for distributing federal support to states that civil rights organizations fought to remove in 1965."<sup>21</sup>

The group goes on: "If states with large communities of color such as California, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas are left behind in any competitive grant process, significant numbers of black and brown children who are needed to meet (the administration's goal of becoming a leader in higher education attainment) will be left behind."<sup>22</sup>

The group also warns that states and school districts should "not use test data as the sole or primary measure of teacher effectiveness."<sup>23</sup> "Any measure of teacher effectiveness must account for the degree of difficulty of the teaching environment so that high-quality teachers will not be deterred from working in high-need schools."<sup>24</sup>

The civil rights groups say that teachers should also be evaluated on their classroom management skills, "including considering whether they keep students in the classroom, help them progress from grade to grade, and eventually lead them towards graduation from high school."<sup>25</sup>

### **Endnotes**

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