Top 5 Issues for 2014: Education

By Pam Goins [1]  
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CSG Director of Education Policy Pam Goins outlines the top five issues in education policy for 2014, including high quality early childhood education and funding, college- and career-readiness, K-12 assessment and accountability systems, the growing use of technology and digital learning, and degree attainment and college completion.

High Quality Early Childhood Education  
In order to adequately prepare students, states in 2014 will look to expand access to high quality early childhood education. The early years of a child’s life are critically important to shape key academic, social and cognitive skills that prepare them for future success in school and life. Investments in preschool, Head Start and child care have been shown to reduce the need for developmental education, referral to special education services and grade repetition. Early childhood education also has been shown to prevent academic achievement gaps before they start, decrease a child’s likelihood to become involved in the criminal justice system and increase a child’s earnings as an adult. As states review policies to develop and improve successful systems and expand access, services should increase for low and moderate income children and those with special needs.

College, Workforce and Life Readiness  
With evolving technology and its inseparable link to the skills required for current professions, the need for advanced and critical problem-solving skills is foremost on the minds of educators. Educational systems must provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge and solve complex problems. Students must be able to work independently and with each other; they also need to communicate ideas effectively. To be successful in today’s world, every student must graduate from high school with the skills and dispositions needed for success in college, the workforce and life.
Rigorous standards are needed to ensure high school graduates have academic knowledge and skills. In addition, students need an environment where they can succeed and be better prepared for two- and four-year colleges and universities, beginning a career and obtaining life skills.

**K-12 Assessment and Accountability Systems**
States have become innovators because of the federal waiver process required for exemption from No Child Left Behind’s most onerous accountability requirements. The majority of states now include a myriad of learning goals for students and a wider range of interim performance targets that extend beyond reading and math. Schools now must meet complex performance indexes that determine their progress and serve as a way to identify struggling schools for intervention. These multiple measures of student success must include formative and summative assessments including performance-based assessments and longitudinal data systems that efficiently collect, analyze and disperse information for well-informed decision-making. The end result will be a system that measures knowledge, understanding and application with an authentic, real-world purpose and audience that shows students can reason, problem-solve and collaborate with others to produce individual responses.

**Technology and Digital Learning**
Digital learning increasingly is being used to supplement face-to-face instruction and plays a variety of roles in student access and success. State policymakers will turn their attention to how the fast-growing array of free and fee-based online courses can be optimally packaged into competency-based and credit-bearing credentials. A growing trend is Massive Open Online Courses, which allow students to take courses without a cap on enrollment. These courses can be a highly affordable alternative to a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom, but policymakers will be confronting the accreditation and crediting of these courses in 2014. State officials also are being asked to financially support technology in the classroom which enhances online learning, blended classrooms, teacher professional development and instructional practices all focused on informing instruction that is more personalized and tailored to meet students’ needs. Flexibility in awarding credit for digital education also is key as policymakers open the door for changes to the traditional school day and calendar, professional learning communities, learning inside and outside of the classroom, and less emphasis on “seat time” versus competency-based learning.

**Degree Attainment and College Completion**
The U.S. economy increasingly demands a well-educated workforce. Careers requiring no more than a high school diploma a generation ago now necessitate some higher education, at a minimum. The two-year degree or certificate has become the new minimum standard for many professions. As employers expect their workers to have increased skills and knowledge, unless states increase degree attainment, the end result will be a workforce that is unprepared for the job requirements of the 21st century due to the increasing skills gap. Developing a system of higher education to compete with a rapidly evolving global workforce will require the informed involvement of state legislators and higher education leadership. State policymakers must focus on outcomes, providing a world-class higher education system that is student-centered and aligned with the knowledge and skills students need to succeed.

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