Top 5 Issues for 2015: Education

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CSG Director of Education Policy Pam Goins outlines the top five issues in education policy for 2015, including school readiness, experiential and work-based learning, academic success for at-risk populations, innovative state accountability systems, and advance attainment of degrees, certificates and other high-quality credentials.

School Readiness for All
Researchers at Johns Hopkins University have found a child’s cognitive, emotional, physical and social development is critical to his or her success in school. Many factors impact school readiness, including the type and quality of a child’s early life experiences, the home environment and challenges due to poverty. For children to be ready to learn, they should have mastered developmentally appropriate levels of language, literacy, motor skills, socialization, and scientific and mathematical thinking. As state leaders work to measure and adequately prepare students for school, they will be looking at policies and practices focused on effective child care, Head Start and pre-kindergarten programs that promote high quality and efficient early learning programs to ensure school readiness for all children.

Experiential and Work-Based Learning
Students must graduate high school with the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary for college, the workplace and life. In order to accomplish this goal, students need environments that encourage them to apply their knowledge, solve complex problems and learn much needed communication skills. Experiential and work-based learning will not only increase student engagement in the classroom, but also help connect learning to application on the job site. State policymakers will be looking at ways to help local school districts offer internships, job shadowing, enhanced field trips, community or service-learning, paid work opportunities and clinical experiences.
With future careers as the focus, these learning experiences can offer an opportunity for students to engage with a variety of jobs, network with potential employers, determine future courses of study and create job skills necessary for employment.

**Academic Success for At-Risk Populations**

Students can be at risk of failure in school due to a wide range of issues or circumstances, such as poverty, race, ethnicity, culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, disabilities, mental health disorders or chronic health problems. To overcome these challenges and enhance learning, students require supportive instruction, continuous appropriate assessment, ongoing professional development for educators and staff, and appropriate referral to effective community services. State policymakers will be looking at strategies to create conditions where administrators, educators, parents and the extended school community offer individualized, personalized learning with high expectations for success needed to ensure school connectedness in stimulating and challenging learning environments for all students.

**Innovative State Accountability Systems**

More than 40 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have taken advantage of the federal waiver process to be more innovative as they implement the accountability requirements of No Child Left Behind. The relief given by the U.S. Department of Education, however, expires at the end of the 2014-15 school year. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was up for reauthorization in 2007, but with no congressional compromise in sight, states must determine the next steps for adopting and implementing college- and career-ready standards and assessments, developing effective state accountability systems and creating or sustaining teacher and principal evaluation systems. Waiver renewals must focus on continued emphasis for graduating all students ready for college and careers, closing the achievement gaps, increasing the graduation rates and targeting interventions in the state’s lowest-performing schools. The majority of states can request renewals of up to three years and will apply by the end of March 2015. Certain states will be fast-tracked with requests due in late January and will offer longer renewals through the 2018-19 school year.

**Advance Attainment of Degrees, Certificates and High-Quality Credentials**

State economies rely on the job market and business demands a well-educated workforce. Additionally, during an age of continued high unemployment, business and industry claim they cannot find skilled workers for vacant jobs. According to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, by 2018, nearly two-thirds of all jobs will require a postsecondary credential or degree. The two-year degree, certificate or credential has become the new minimum standard for many professions. Policymakers, K-12 and postsecondary education officials, business, labor, economic development officials and other key stakeholders will focus on ensuring student outcomes are met by providing a world-class postsecondary education system that is student-centered and aligned with the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in a career thereby increasing the number of degrees, certificates and high quality credentials awarded.

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