Top 5 Issues in 2012: Education

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Educators and policymakers realize that all of America’s students need a high-quality education to prepare them for college and careers. 2012 promises to be another busy year in transformational strategies in education. In order to ensure a world-class education, leaders will likely address these top five issues facing states and territories (“the states”) this year.

Reforming America’s Public School Systems: What does the law allow?
Because Congress has failed to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, states now can apply for No Child Left Behind waivers if they implement transformational initiatives to ensure students are college- and career-ready. States must address four major areas, including rigorous academic standards with aligned assessments; a robust accountability system; a plan to design an educator evaluation system based on multiple measures, including student growth; and elimination of unnecessary district reporting requirements such as school/district improvement requirements and Title 1 school-wide program restrictions.

Transforming Education through Increased Rigor and Accountability
Forty-six states and the District of Columbia are implementing the Common Core State Standards and moving toward assessments that accurately measure student progress. Two consortia are developing instruments to assess all students and provide data to inform classroom instruction, direct professional development and to ensure teachers know where their students stand on their path toward college- and career-readiness. States also are looking to create deeper evaluation structures for accountability. Policymakers may consider a set of core principles, including annual accountability determinations, decisions based on student growth and outcomes, disaggregation of data to determine achievement gaps, transparent reporting, diagnostic reviews of schools that will lead to quality supports and interventions targeted to the lowest-performing schools and districts.

Increasing Teacher Effectiveness Through Salary and Tenure Reform
To improve teacher quality, policymakers may consider interventions such as performance pay, which compensates teachers based in part on student test results and evaluations from administrators and peers. Another reform gaining traction involves changing teacher tenure laws to ensure tenure only after proving teacher effectiveness or making it easier to terminate ineffective teachers. Tenure reform can include increasing the number of years it takes to be eligible, empowering local districts to remove tenured teachers for an increased number of offenses, or ending the practice of laying off teachers based primarily on seniority.
• Using School Choice to Enhance Outcomes for Students
Concern over the quality of public education may lead some policymakers to consider school choice options, providing parents with alternatives to traditional public school education. Policies can include vouchers or scholarships that use state revenue for children to enroll in private schools. State tax deductions for tuition paid for private schools and tax credits for contributions to nonprofit scholarship-funding organizations also give parents options. Other forms of school choice include nontraditional charters, early college high schools, or magnet schools focusing on specific learning areas such as arts, foreign language, or math and science. Policymakers also may consider whether regulations governing home schooling should be relaxed or strengthened in their states.

• Overhauling Higher Education to Ensure a Competitive Edge
In order for the United States workforce to grow, millions of new jobs must be developed. Under the current trends, however, many potential workers will not have the skills necessary to be a productive employee. The higher education pipeline must be strengthened to ensure more students succeed. Strategies such as investing in community colleges, increasing financial aid awareness, decreasing the number of students who require remedial courses, focusing on first-generation and minority students, and creating competency-based degrees will all be discussed this year.

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