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NEWSLETTERS**The Education Innovator**

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Editor's Note: Congratulations to Peter Cunningham who was confirmed as the new Assistant Secretary for Communications and Outreach.

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GETTING IT RIGHT, RIGHT FROM THE START: BIRTH TO FIVE KINDERGARTEN READINESS

President Obama has called investing in early childhood initiatives the first pillar of reforming schools and has challenged states to raise the quality of their early childhood programs, specifically to "ensure that children are better prepared for success by the time they enter kindergarten."

Studies show that skill differences at the kindergarten level between children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and their wealthier peers are not only substantial, but continue throughout their school years. It is also increasingly known through neuroscience studies that a child's brain develops most dramatically during the first five years of life. Several national studies indicate that children from low-income homes who are enrolled in high-quality early childhood programs are more apt to overcome skill gaps than those not enrolled in the programs.

Therefore the president believes that it is imperative to provide the neediest children--starting at birth--with quality education and other support services for them, their parents, and their families, in order to give them a better chance to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

One Educator's Vision Helps Children Statewide

One early childhood educator, the late Judith P. Hoyer, put her unique vision for meeting this challenge in place in Maryland more than 15 years ago. As the supervisor of Early Childhood Education in Prince George's County, Hoyer saw a need for collaboration among the many professionals who deliver the wide spectrum of early childhood and family support services. Her solution? Bring together all of the educational and other needed services for at-risk infants and toddlers into a single place in order to provide the children and their families with a comprehensive set of services, and do it either within a Title I elementary school or in direct connection with the school.

The success of Hoyer's early childhood and family learning center led to its replication, and, in 2000, the Maryland legislature passed the Judith P. Hoyer Early Childcare and Educational Enhancement Program, establishing a network of what are widely known simply as the "Judy Centers." The law recognizes

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the innovative vision and memory of Hoyer, who passed away in 1997.

Today, the [Judy Centers network](#) is comprised of 24 facilities, with at least one in 20 of Maryland's 23 counties and in Baltimore City. The centers provide for a five-prong set of school-readiness outcomes for their more than 8,000 students:

- Being healthy, socially adjusted, emotionally aware, and able to communicate with adults and other children;
- Having an awareness of print and letter-sound relationships and understanding a story;
- Understanding basic math ideas, patterns, shapes, and how to put things in a certain order;
- Having an awareness about animal and plant life, and people's roles in the family and the community; and
- Being comfortable with individual creativity and an appreciation for self-expression through the arts.

The mission of the Judy Centers is to provide comprehensive, integrated, full-day, full-year services that promote school readiness for children from birth through age five. Each center must offer prekindergarten, kindergarten, and preschool special education, collaborate with the local Maryland Infant and Toddlers Program, and partner with childcare providers to ensure availability of both before- and after-school programs. The early education programs that are part of a Judy Center are certified by state or national accrediting bodies, including those of Head Start, child care centers, or family child care providers that are separate from the school system. In addition, each center selects at least five community partners to develop and implement its programs. The programmatic focus of these potential partners may include parent involvement programs, adult education and family literacy programs, health care providers, family support centers, and public libraries.

The Judy Centers are one strategy within the Maryland State Department of Education's (MSDE) Strategic Plan of the [Division of Early Childhood Development](#). Since 2005, the MSDE has had responsibility for all aspects of child care and early education, which includes the oversight of child care and family care providers, contracting and grant making for providers to improve early-care quality, and administering the state's Child Care Subsidy Voucher System and the Child Care Credentialing System. Maryland is the only state in which this full scope of early care and education programs is located within the state educational agency. Nancy S. Grasmick, Maryland's State Superintendent of Schools, called the consolidation of early care and education with K-12 education one of the most sensible education reforms that has taken place in the state. "We know that learning takes place long before kindergarten, and educators need to be involved in the process," Dr. Grasmick said.

An Emerging National Network Addresses Zero to Five

As Maryland was expanding the model of the Judy Centers statewide, a similar initiative focused on birth to kindergarten was underway in Chicago, where the [Ounce of Prevention Fund](#) opened the first Educare Center in 2000 to address the school readiness needs of disadvantaged children. The Center, like its counterparts in Maryland, believed that partnerships between the public and private sectors were essential to providing at-risk children with the education and services necessary to equip them for success in kindergarten.

A second Educare Center was developed in Omaha, Nebraska, by the [Buffett Early Childhood Fund](#), which then partnered with the Ounce of Prevention Fund to create a national network, the Bounce Learning Network, to extend the concept of Educare to more communities. As the Network has grown to six Educare Centers, adding sites in Milwaukee, Tulsa, Denver, and Miami, each of the Centers serves as a "showroom for quality," highlighting their collaborative approach. The Centers bring together public funding for child care, Head Start, and preschool, and they share governance for the Centers' programs by partnering with the philanthropic, programmatic, and public schools sectors to form a model for change in the Educare states. The network will expand soon to Washington State with the opening of a center in Seattle, and more centers are under development in Arizona and Maine.

All Educare Centers share common features that include the following: a commitment to research-based practices and educational strategies; small class sizes and high staff-to-child ratios; a focus on language and literacy; on-site family support services and parental services; and use of the arts to support social-emotional, language, and literacy development. The centers also share strategies and lessons learned, network on common challenges facing their work with young children, and share ways to leverage increased investments in Educare states and communities.

Promising Evidence that a Comprehensive Approach is Effective

In Maryland, the State Department of Education has evaluated the readiness of kindergarten students at Judy Centers, comparing those students who received Judy Center services prior to their kindergarten year with their kindergarten peers who did not participate in the Centers' pre-K programs. Across the state, the MSDE has trained kindergarten teachers how to document their daily observations, collect work samples from their students, and use age-appropriate guidelines to determine if kindergarten students are proficient in seven domains: personal and social development, language and literacy, mathematical thinking, scientific thinking, social studies, the arts, and physical development. Known as the [Maryland Model for School Readiness](#)

(MMSR) the assessment is designed to provide parents, teachers, and early childhood education providers with a common understanding of what children should know and be able to do upon entering school. MMSR data for children who received Judy Center services prior to their kindergarten year were compared with data for children who had not received those services. In the consecutive school years of 2003 to 2005, the MMSR data showed that economically disadvantaged children (those who qualify for free and reduced-priced meals) with prior Judy Center experience were significantly more successful in terms of readiness for school than disadvantaged children without such experience. In 2005, the percentage of ELL kindergartners with prior Judy Center experience who were fully ready for school (88 percent) exceeded not only the other ELL children in the Centers, but also the Centers' kindergarten population overall.

Additionally, five centers in the Bounce Learning Network participated in an [implementation study](#) during the 2007-2008 school year, conducted by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute ([FPG Child Development Institute](#)), that looked at data for areas of school readiness, vocabulary, social and emotional skills, and classroom quality. Using the Bracken Basic Concepts Scale, which measures comprehension of concepts such as sequence, letters, and colors, the study revealed that students who joined Educare Centers between birth and age two not only outperformed those who attended the Centers for shorter periods, but also the national performance average for all kindergarten students. Similarly, when evaluated for vocabulary on a standardized measure of reading readiness, Educare students with three to five years experience averaged scores of 99.2, just below the national mean for all children.

Both the Judy Centers and Bounce Learning Networks are continuing their evaluation efforts. MSDE expects to release new data on the performance of Judy Center students this fall. The FPG Child Development Institute is continuing to follow children in the Educare Centers and is in the early stages of planning for a future randomized control study of the Educare model.

Helping State Policymakers Do Right by At-Risk Birth to Five Year Olds

The needs of at-risk infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and their families for programs that will prepare them for success in kindergarten and beyond, and for policy change at the state level to meet these needs, is the focus of a multi-state consortium supported by several major philanthropies, including the Buffett Early Childhood Funds, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The 13 members of the [Birth to Five Policy Alliance](#) represent the governance sector, including governors and state legislators; chief state school officers; child education, care and advocacy associations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Center on Children in Poverty; and special interest groups like the National Council of La Raza. Together, these organizations are pursuing three strategies to support state-level policy: knowledge development, including research and policy analysis affecting at-risk children birth to age five; outreach and support for state policymakers; and building champions for new innovations and investments in birth to five education among key stakeholders.

At the federal level, President Obama has proposed new funding in his fiscal year (FY) 2010 budget to develop cutting-edge plans and programs to raise the quality of early learning programs, challenging states to ensure that more children are better prepared for success by the time they enter kindergarten. For FY 2010, an Early Learning Challenge Grant program is proposed, which will help states ensure that children are better prepared for success by their entry in kindergarten. Through the current stimulus funding, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is investing \$5 billion in efforts to expand the reach of Early Head Start and Head Start to an additional 150,000 children, and offering 55,000 first-time parents regular visits from nurses to increase the likelihood that their children will be healthy when they enter kindergarten.

Hope for Federal Leadership and Resources

The President is also increasing the collaboration between the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services (HHS). The agencies are working together, meeting in cross-agency working groups around specific areas such as infants and toddlers, parent involvement, workforce and professional development, data collection, and meeting the needs of special needs children and English language learners. Additionally, the two agencies are consulting with the White House on creating the Presidential Early Learning Council that will encourage states to better coordinate services across multiple federal early childhood funding sources, focusing particularly on birth to five as well as on key transitions such as preK to the K-12 system. At the state level, support is available from HHS for the creation of State Advisory Councils on Early Childhood and Care, which will lead in the creation or enhancement of high-quality, comprehensive systems of early childhood development. This support will work to ensure statewide coordination and collaboration among a wide range of programs and services, including child care, Head Start, IDEA preschool, infants and families programs, and pre-kindergarten programs and services.

President Obama and Secretary Duncan are committed to providing the support that our youngest children need to prepare to succeed later in school. To help guide the Department's course, the Secretary has brought in longtime early learning expert Barbara Bowman. She counsels, "If we have learned anything from the last 50 years of research, it is that the education of

young children is critical to their later school success. This does not mean that children do not learn later, only that it is harder to promote high achievement if children do not get off to a good start. It means that starting between birth and age 3, children at risk for school achievement must have access to high-quality preschool programs. Preschool is not a vaccination; it has to be followed by high-quality kindergarten and later grades. Nevertheless, early childhood education must be a priority if all our children are to have an equal chance to succeed.&rdquo

Key Resources:

- [Early Childhood Education at the U.S. Department of Education](#)
- [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#)
- [National Research Council](#) and the [National Academies Press](#) for publications including *Adding it Up: Helping Children Learn Mathematics*; *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*; and *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*
- [Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Children](#)
- [ZEROTOTHREE](#)
- [First 5 California](#)
- [Thrive by Five Washington](#)
- [Young Children and the Arts: Making Creative Connections](#) – A Report of the Task Force on Children’s Learning and the Arts: Birth to Age Eight

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WHAT'S NEW From the U.S. Department of Education

Secretary Duncan officially [launched](#) his "Listening and Learning: A Conversation About Education Reform" tour with three events in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia.. Since that time, he has embarked on visits to other states including Michigan and Vermont to gather input on the Obama Administration's education agenda, including early childhood learning, standards, teacher quality, higher education, and workforce development. "Before crafting any education law in Washington, we want to hear from people across America -- parents, teachers, and administrators -- about the everyday issues and challenges in our schools that need our national attention and full support," the Secretary explained. Many events will be taped and reports and video summaries will be published on the Department's web site and on the Secretary's blog. To visit the Listening Tour Online, click [here](#). (May 2009)

The Senate has [confirmed](#) the nominations of Russlynn Ali to be Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Peter Cunningham to be Assistant Secretary for Communications and Outreach, Gabriella Gomez to be Assistant Secretary for Legislation and Congressional Affairs, Carmel Martin to be Assistant Secretary for Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, and Charles Rose to be General Counsel. Furthermore, President Obama [announced](#) his intent to nominate Tony Miller as Deputy Secretary of Education. (April 29)

The Secretary [announced](#) the selection of the 2009 Presidential Scholars. The program was established by Executive Order in 1964 to honor academic achievement by graduating high school seniors. It was expanded in 1979 to honor students who demonstrate exceptional talent in the arts. Each year, 141 students are named, including at least one young man and woman from every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and American families living abroad. Another 15 students are chosen at-large, and 20 students are scholars in the arts. Over 3,000 candidates qualified on the basis of significant ACT or SAT scores or nomination through the national youngARTS competition of the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts. The Commission on Presidential Scholars, appointed by the President, chooses the finalists. Scholars will be recognized June 20-24 in Washington, D.C. (May 4)

In a Rose Garden ceremony with President Obama, Dr. Jill Biden, and Secretary Duncan, high school special education teacher Anthony Mullen was [named](#) the 2009 National Teacher of the Year. Mullen, who served as a New York City police officer for 20 years, teaches at The ARCH School (an alternative education branch of Greenwich High School) in Greenwich, Conn. He also mentors fellow teachers, leads a program to provide academic support to students who have been expelled, and is commissioner of a youth baseball league. He is the 59th recipient of the award. The National Teacher of the Year program -- a project of the Council of Chief State School Officers sponsored by the ING Foundation -- designates an outstanding representative from among the 56 State Teachers of the Year (representing all 50 states, the District of Columbia, a number of outlying territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity). The winner is selected by a panel of 15 leading national education organizations. (April 30)

The Department and Secretary Duncan are set on a "moon-shot" goal to get America on track and return to first in the world in high school and college graduation rates, school readiness, academic achievement, college matriculation and retention, and completion rates. Both the "Obama Effect" and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 are bookends for this unparalleled opportunity to significantly increase student achievement. The Department's first [progress report](#) elaborates on efforts over the past 100 days to deliver on this promise and to lay the groundwork for the next four years. (April 29)

Confronting the reality that America once had one of the most educated


workforces in the world, but in the 21st century it has slipped to the middle of the pack, the May edition of *Education News Parents Can Use* (originally broadcast May 19, 8:00-9:00 p.m. ET) dealt with issues about ways to ensure that more students gain access to college. The show featured effective information to raise awareness about practices in college access and completion; provided resources for families to help plan for and finance college, and included a live discussion with federal, state, and foundation leaders and local educators committed to the goal of establishing America's leadership in higher education. (To watch the archived broadcast, go to <http://www.connectlive.com/events/ednews>.)

Arts Education

As education is increasingly focusing on the 21st century knowledge and skills that will prepare students for the global economy, the Arts Education Partnership (AEP) is developing The Arts and 21st Century Learning Research and Policy Agenda. Its objectives are to: provide critical guidance to educators, policymakers, researchers, and funders of research; help build and refine knowledge of the role of arts and creativity in the learning that all people need in the 21st century; and build on AEP's legacy of supporting research via several successive national-level research agendas, including Priorities for Arts Education Research (1997), and The Arts and Education: New Opportunities for Research (2004). For information on this initiative, contact the Arts Education Partnership at aep@ccsso.org or visit their website, www.aep-arts.org.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) announced its second round of funding for fiscal year 2009 in several arts-related areas including Learning in the Arts. These grants support projects that provide in-depth knowledge, skills, and understanding of the arts to children and youth in schools and communities. Projects engage students with skilled artists and teachers. Examples of projects supported by Learning in the Arts grants include: a playwriting and educational tutoring program for incarcerated San Francisco and San Mateo County teenagers that pairs professional theater artists one-on-one with youth to create original one-act plays; a summer music camp that provides free-of-charge classical music training, with an emphasis on increasing performance skills, to public school students living in New York City's five boroughs; and an intensive summer visual arts program for high school students. Click this link for a [complete listing of projects receiving Learning in the Arts grant support](#). (April 2009)

Closing the Achievement Gap

"Left Behind in America: The Nation's Dropout Crisis"  [PDF-\[507KB\]](#)," a report by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston and the Alternative Schools Network in Chicago found that nearly 6.2 million students in the United States between the ages of 16 and 24 in 2007 dropped out of high school and that men and African American and Hispanic students of both genders are among those particularly prone to dropping out of high school. The report emphasized the importance of having at least a high school education. (May 5)

A new [report](#) "Parsing the Achievement Gap II," follows up on an Educational Testing Service (ETS) 2003 report "Parsing the Achievement Gap: Baselines for Tracking Progress," and reaches the conclusion that while a few of the gaps in achievement have narrowed, overall, there has not been much progress. The updated report identifies 16 factors related to academic performance ranging from birth weight and hunger to lead poisoning, parental involvement, and teacher quality. The report then looks at whether these important factors were distributed evenly across different racial/ethnic and income groups. (April 30)

Early Childhood Education

Save the Children published its tenth annual [State of the World's Mothers](#) report. Focusing on the critical importance of children's experiences in their early years, the report suggests specific activities mothers and caregivers can do with their young children to help them reach their full potential in school. The report highlights the urgent need to reach 75 million children in developing countries who fail to complete primary school, as well as the 2.5 million fourth graders in the United States who are not reading at grade level. It shines a spotlight on places where children have the best chance to succeed in school and shows that effective solutions to early education challenges are affordable – even in the poorest communities. (May 2009)

A new statewide program in Oregon—[EQUIP](#)-[MS Word 60KB] (Education and Quality Investment Partnership)—aims to improve outcomes for the state's youngest learners. The program will provide incentives to early childcare and education workers who complete college courses or training. EQUIP was launched by a partnership of six organizations and will use nearly \$3 million in federal stimulus funds, as well as private donations, to pay for the incentives. (May 2009)

The National Research Council's new report, [Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How](#) concludes that well-planned assessments can inform teaching and efforts to improve programs and can contribute to better outcomes for children, but poor assessments or misuse of the results can harm both children and programs. The report offers principles to guide the design, implementation, and use of assessments in early childhood settings. (April 2009)

Education Reform

[Registration](#) is now open for the 2009 ECS National Forum on Education Policy, *Shifting Education and the Economy Into High Gear*, sponsored by the [Education Commission of the States](#). The forum will be held from July 8-10 in Nashville, Tenn. Participants will learn how education can be "an engine to ignite the economy." (May 2009)

Studies have shown that quality education has a positive impact on various social factors such as income, health, and voting and incarceration rates. A new Web site seeks to quantify just how much education matters. The "[Common Good Forecaster](#)" is a project of the United Way of America and the American Human Development Project, a New York-based nonprofit. The site uses U.S. Census data to calculate education's influence. (May 2009)

Raising Student Achievement

In an effort to improve its assessment system, [South Carolina](#) has instituted a new state test. The updated exam is intended to yield more detailed information about individual students' strengths and weaknesses. Parents will receive a breakdown of subject scores, such as geometry, algebra, numbers and operations, and other subcategories in the mathematics portion of the exam. (May 2009)

The [Alliance for Excellent Education](#) offers fact sheets on various subjects. Recently, the organization updated its information on adolescent literacy [PDF](#)-[288KB], citing information from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, otherwise known as the "Nation's Report Card." The brief notes that millions of American middle and high school students lack skills in reading, writing, and critical thinking. (April 2009)

Students who take part in high-quality learning programs before and after school show substantial improvement in academic achievement, attendance, engagement, and social and emotional development, a report [PDF](#)-[3.66MB] from the [National Governors Association](#) and the [Council of Chief State School Officers](#) asserts. The report outlines strategies that states can implement to improve the quality of extended-learning initiatives, some of which include setting program standards, measuring results, and providing incentives to improve quality. (March 2009)

Reading

A new report, [A Critical Mission: Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States](#), from the nonprofit Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) on adolescent literacy discusses the urgency of the problem in depth and presents specific solutions. The report urges states to elevate students' reading skills in the middle and high school grades by the development of comprehensive adolescent literacy policies that establish improvement in middle grades and high school reading and writing as the most immediate critical priority for public schools. Governor Tim Kaine of Virginia, the current chair of the nonpartisan SREB, released the report at the Education Writers Association last month. (April 2009)

Teacher Quality and Development

A new analysis [PDF](#)-[1.85MB]—*The State of the Higher Education Workforce*, from the [American Federation of Teachers](#)—reveals that the overall number of college faculty and instructor slots grew from 1997 to 2007, but nearly two-thirds of that growth was in positions off the tenure track. The growth in these jobs, and the decline in tenured positions, was most apparent at community colleges. (May 2009)

According to a new report [PDF](#)-[4.05MB] by the [National Governors Association](#), state policy leaders should work to boost the quality of their teaching workforce by retooling state and local systems for recruiting, preparing, and retaining talented educators. Changes should include setting or raising minimum-entry standards for teacher- and principal-training programs; increasing programs' emphasis on student achievement; and designing performance-based pay and career ladders. (2009)

ASCD recently announced that Marc Cohen, principal of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School (MLK) in Germantown, Md., and Bijal Damani, an 11th and 12th grade commerce and business studies teacher in the Galaxy Education System in Rajkot, India, are the winners of ASCD's [2009 Outstanding Young Educator Award](#) (OYEA). Cohen helped to dramatically change the school's climate and the community's expectations. Damani says that she consistently uses project-based learning experiences with her students to help them understand business concepts while developing skills such as problem solving and creativity. (March 2009)

Technology

In an effort to promote 21st century education and improvements in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education, nearly 700 technology industry executives, educators, and government officials from all over the country participated in the inaugural [Innovate-Educate New Mexico](#) conference earlier this month at the Albuquerque Convention Center. The event sought to coordinate existing efforts and collaborate on new ideas that better engage students specifically in STEM fields. Organizers also did it an interesting way by including talk show formats such as "The View" and "The Late Show with David Letterman" (which surprisingly featured a live band) as well as a presidential-

style debate and remarks from several of the state's top elected officials. (April 2009)

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INNOVATIONS IN THE NEWS

Charter Schools

Charter schools in New Orleans, often lacking specialists in special education areas such as speech therapy and instruction for developmentally delayed students, now have a non-profit resource for help. Serving the Unique Needs of Students, better known as the SUNS Center, was created by the School Leadership Center and the Baptist Community Ministries as a "one-stop shop" for charter school leaders in need of special education services. The Center provides 23 charters with services that range from evaluations to professional development to referrals to other New Orleans organizations for help. According to a special education coordinator at one charter school, the Center's services are important to being in compliance with state requirements. [More—The [New Orleans CityBusiness](#)] (May 11)

Raising Student Achievement

Elementary students in 22 Detroit schools are increasing their skills and test scores in science thanks to BioKIDS, a hands-on curriculum and professional-development program designed by a team of researchers and science educators at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Students, just like real scientists, leave their urban classrooms to investigate, gather specimens, and devise scientific arguments, going beyond gaining only knowledge of scientific facts and concepts. On-going workshops for the teachers participating in BioKIDS allow them to share samples of their students' work and problem solve with peers about their instructional approaches. Previously, students were "just reading and trying to understand it," said elementary teacher Beatrice May, but with BioKIDS "they can understand the language...It's real life. They can see." [More—[Education Week](#)] (May 11) (*paid subscription required*)

In Colorado, state education leaders are expecting a new generation of educational standards will lead to deeper understanding in 13 content areas. State assistant education commissioner Jo O'Brien characterized the new draft standards as clearer, shorter, and focused on rigor when comparing them to the 1994 versions currently in use in Colorado. The draft standards in four subjects – math, science, music, and reading-writing – have been released, and state leaders are undertaking an eight-city tour to get the public's input. [More—The [Denver Post](#)] (May 11)

A new study exploring the roles of students' home cultures and out-of-school experiences suggests that white and African-American students perform differently depending on the nature of their learning groups. Researchers divided a group of 132 4th and 5th graders into racially homogeneous groups for lessons on math estimation, and used three groupings: one emphasizing communal ties, another promising a group reward, and one that offered an opportunity for individual rewards. The African-American students scored highest in the communal group, and for the white students, the group stressing individual rewards produced the best performance. While acknowledging the limits of the small scale of the study, its lead author, Eric A. Hurley, said the results should raise educators' consciousness about students' cultures. "All of the kids were capable of doing this task to a high level," he noted, "but it matters how you engage them." [More—[Education Week](#)] (May 5) (*paid subscription required*)

In a study published in the journal *Science*, seventh grade African American students in suburban Connecticut who were doing poorly in school performed significantly better when asked to undertake writing assignments about how such values as athletic ability, creativity, and being smart were important to them. The students who were randomly assigned to the writing group, had an average G.P.A. that was 0.4 points higher than those in the control group. The students who benefited from the writing assignments, according to the study's authors, felt more adequate than their struggling peers and the writing assignments helped to remove anxiety about academic performance. [More—The [New York Times](#)] (April 17) (*free registration required*)

School Improvement

The number of Chicago schools on a year-round schedule will triple to 132 this August, putting Illinois just behind California and Hawaii in the number of year-round schools. City school leaders cited better performance on state tests by students in its existing year-round schools over others in the district as a reason for the increase. Schools CEO Ron Huberman also said that local school councils agreed with the change to classes beginning the first week of August, a month earlier than other schools. The issue had the input of local teachers, students, and parents, according to Huberman. [More—The [Chicago Tribune](#)] (April 27)

State education chiefs and representatives of governors from 37 states convened in Chicago recently to discuss the possibility of common standards in math and English language arts. Co-sponsored by the National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State Schools Officers (CCSSO), the discussion builds on momentum created by the recent release of *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education* by NGA, CCSSO, and Achieve, Inc., as well as NGA's adoption this past March of a policy statement endorsing common standards. While the meeting organizers were

not certain that all states in attendance were ready to fully embrace the concept, several were prepared to take the lead with the support of their governors, according to Gene Wilhoit, executive director of CCSSO. [More—[The Education Week](#)] (April 22) (*paid subscription required*)

As Philadelphia's superintendent Arlene Ackerman prepares to implement a new strategic plan for the district, local school leaders have another report concerning the performance of the public schools versus those run by private providers, and it shows that students in district-run schools outscored those in the privately managed schools. The latest study conducted by researchers at the Center for Social Organization of Schools at The Johns Hopkins University, analyzed test scores in reading and math at 88 middle-grades schools, tracking the performance of students starting with the 1996-97 school year, which allowed researchers to examine performance before and after the implementation of Philadelphia's diverse provider system. The study was published in this month's issue of the *American Journal of Education*. [More—[Education Week](#)] (April 16) (*paid subscription required*)

In Mississippi, Governor Haley Barbour signed "The Children First Act," calling it "the state's most sweeping education reform in more than a decade." The new law empowers the state Department of Education to remove local superintendents and school board members whose districts fail to meet state performance standards for two consecutive years. While some critics of the Act worry that two years is too short a time for the proposed actions, Mississippi Superintendent Hank Bounds indicated it gives his department "the confidence that our leaders are making the right choices that always put children first." A new school accountability rating system will accompany implementation of the Act, one with accountability standards based on achievement test scores, academic growth, and graduation/dropout rates. [More—[The Commercial Dispatch \(MS\)](#)] (April 10)

Teacher Quality and Development

New Jersey, the first state to offer alternative routes to teacher certification, is experiencing increased interest in the opportunity it provides for would-be teachers displaced by the recent economic downturn and is fashioning a specific opportunity to bring unemployed finance professionals into schools to teach math. Open houses for prospective students for the alternative route teaching programs at the state's community colleges have been at standing-room-only capacity in recent months. In March, the New Jersey State Legislature enacted a pilot program called Traders to Teachers, which will place its first group of 25 students in math classrooms as early as next January. Nationally, 62,000 alternative route teachers were certified last year across the country and, according to a representative of the National Center for Alternative Certification, a significant increase is expected this year. [More—[The New York Times](#) and [The Star-Ledger \(NJ\)](#)] (May 11 and April 12)

Other alternative route programs, such as The Boston Teacher Residency and the New Teacher Project, are experiencing increased interest from mid-career professionals who are considering a change to teaching. The Boston program accepts 75 applicants annually and, according to its director, Jesse Soloman, career switchers offer work experience and content knowledge over just transcripts. The New Teacher Project, which operates in almost 20 cities, reports a 44 percent increase in applicants this year but, according to David Keeling, a spokesperson for the Project "We're not just looking for people looking for another paycheck." [More—[Forbes](#)] (April 24)

More than 60,000 Maryland teachers will have new ID numbers this fall as part of an effort by the state education department to help them do a better job and help local school systems to match teachers to students based on both classroom and subject taught. The purpose of the new IDs will "not...be used to track teachers and evaluations and what they do for students," according to Clara Floyd of the Maryland State Teachers Association. "As we know more about those teachers in particular circumstances - where they are placed to teach - we can help those teachers and give them more support," said state schools superintendent Dr. Nancy Grasmick. [More—[WBAL-TV](#) Baltimore] (April 9)

Technology in Education

Despite the rapid growth of Web-based networking tools in the lives of students, a majority of school administrators surveyed by the Consortium for School Networking reported that they are not a prominent part of the school curriculum. The [survey](#) of 1,200 superintendents, technology directors, and curriculum directors also indicated "as the pace of technology integration in schools quickens, and more...educators see the practical benefits may tech tools have for student learning, administrators are working to recast their policies." Yet, the educators surveyed also expressed concerns about "safety and appropriate use of devices during school time." The survey also found that district administrators recognize the need for new types of professional development for teachers as districts consider bringing more Web 2.0 tools into classrooms. [More—[Education Week](#)] (May 1) (*paid subscription required*)

With an estimated 1.7 million online tests administered this spring, Virginia is a national leader in online testing. Begun as a means of speeding up the time it takes for local schools to receive end-of-course tests for high schools in 2000, the state's Web-based-testing initiative has grown from 15 school districts participating to all systems administering tests online. Each district receives \$50,000 from the state, and another \$26,000 for each school to help with developing their technology capacities. All of Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) tests are available online with the exception of the English writing tests. While some districts limit their online testing to the SOLs, some are administering local assessments in science, math, and history online as well. In

Chesterfield County, near Richmond, 29 of its 38 elementary school are administering at least one subject test online. [More—The [Richmond Times-Dispatch](#)] (April 13)

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