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NATIONAL NEWS

U.S. Education Pressured by International Comparisons

Education Week

By: Sean Cavanagh

January 9, 2012

[http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/01/12/16overview.h31.html?](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/01/12/16overview.h31.html?kfn=ZYWFw6N2DeSCf50Rq%2Fgr11NZ0dzUtl%2Bd4QvM&cmp=clp-edweek&intc=EW-QC12-EWH)

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Concern over American students' middling scores on high-profile tests vies with caution about cultural and political factors that shape school improvement

Americans learn a bit more every year about the strengths and shortcomings of the education systems in other countries, thanks to a steady raft of international test data, academic scholarship, and analysis arriving from home and abroad. Sometimes, what they learn inspires them. Sometimes, it confuses them. And sometimes, to judge from the collective angst on display, it alarms them.

Today, elected officials of all political stripes and advocates for a range of school policies scrutinize the results from international exams and comparisons with the intensity that, a decade ago, would have been reserved for state and local test scores. U.S. policymakers and researchers also study the teaching methods, curricula, and academic programs of high-performing countries for lessons that can be applied to American schools—and the influence of those foreign-born ideas can be seen in many nationwide, state, and district policies.

Many U.S. leaders say that the performance of American students on a handful of high-profile international tests and measurements—while mixed—underscores the weaknesses of the American education system, and foreshadows the serious economic challenges the country will face if it does not improve the skills of its future workforce. Those results show the following:

- American 15-year-olds scored at the international average of industrialized nations in science and reading and below the international average in math on the most recent [Program for International Student Assessment](#), or PISA, released last year.
- Although students in the United States scored above the international averages in both 4th and 8th grade math and science, they performed well below high fliers such as Japan and Singapore on the 2007 [Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study](#), or TIMSS, which compares developed and nonindustrialized nations.
- U.S. 4th graders topped 22 participating jurisdictions, and were outscored by just 10 of them, on the most recent [Progress in International Reading Literacy Study](#), or PIRLS, though American students' literacy marks stagnated from the previous exam.
- Americans account for more than a quarter of the college-educated workforce among nations that belong to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Group of Twenty, or G-20—the largest representation of any such country by far, according to OECD data released last year. But the United States' share of the global college-educated population fell from about 36 percent among 55- to 64-year-olds to 21 percent among 25- to 34-year-olds, partly because of the surging college attainment in foreign countries, such as China.

Driving the Debate

Such numbers dismay many American policymakers, who say the country needs to raise its performance, or risk becoming a less prosperous, less productive, and less innovative nation.

"It is an undeniable fact that countries who outeducate us today are going to outcompete us tomorrow," President Barack Obama declared at a White House event in September. "If we're serious about building an economy that lasts—an economy in which hard work pays off with the opportunity for solid middle-class jobs—we've got to get serious about education."

Elected officials and advocates routinely cite the United States' mediocre standing, and what they know of the educational practices of high-performing nations, to gird their arguments for their favored changes to American education—from encouraging greater parental involvement to revamping school curricula and standards to paying teachers more.

But analysts and researchers caution that while self-examination is a good thing, American elected officials and educators need to take a nuanced approach to interpreting test scores and lessons from abroad, one that considers the full basket of educational, societal, and cultural factors that shape school practices in top-performing nations, and in the United States.

"Education is a complex system," says [James Stigler](#), a professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, who has studied teaching methods in Japan. "You can't take one element or one variable out of a system and expect it to work. We need to understand how different countries are producing results, but we need to be sophisticated in how we interpret those results."

Still, frustration with the United States' lackluster showing on international tests is widespread and bipartisan. Elected officials at all levels routinely point to high scores turned in by such nations as Finland and South Korea—and economic growth in countries such as China and India—as evidence of American complacency, and the urgent need to improve.

"[O]ur nation is falling behind," said U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., in arguing in 2010 in favor of legislation designed to strengthen K-12 and college math and science. The goal, said the former U.S. secretary of education, is "to preserve America's brainpower advantage, so our high-paying jobs don't head overseas to places like India and China."

Specific policies in high-performing nations are also held up as worthy of emulation. Both President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, for instance, have noted that South Korea has a significantly longer average school year than the United States does, and have argued that American students' academic skills tend to wither during long summer breaks.

At a forum on international education held last year, [Duncan said](#) that while U.S. officials should be selective in weighing the merits of high-performing countries' education systems, they also should be aggressive consumers of what works well abroad. "Every nation, of course, has unique characteristics of its teaching profession, culture, and education system, which may not be directly analogous to the U.S.," the secretary said at the event, sponsored by the [National Center on Education and the Economy](#), in Washington. "But to the extent that the U.S. can copy or adapt, and beg, borrow, and steal, successful practices from other nations, we should do so."

In one sense, American policymakers' interest in other countries' education systems is easy to understand, because the comparison with those nations—at least on a superficial level—is as easy as looking at a test score.

Concerns about American students' performance on the international stage date back decades. Over time those worries have become increasingly intertwined with a belief that mediocre scores on nation-by-nation comparisons point to a loss by the United States of its overall economic edge.

That belief has roots that can be traced back at least as far as the Soviet Union's launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957, and it echoed through the 1983 publication of the influential report ["A Nation at Risk,"](#) which famously warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity" in American education that threatened "our very future as a nation and a people." The theme resounded with the 2005 release of ["Rising Above the Gathering Storm,"](#) a report published by the congressionally chartered National Academies that argued that U.S. economic growth would depend in large part on the capabilities of the education system. That report was widely circulated on Capitol Hill and in the business community.

'Decline' Dispute

Yet the "nation at risk" rhetoric has always struck some educators as unduly pessimistic, given the relatively modest changes in the arc of U.S. performance on international measures over time. To the extent that the United States' educational standing has slipped, it is largely because less-populated nations and countries that are surging economically have made faster gains, according to many analysts' reading of those results.

From a statistical standpoint, "there is no decline on any measure that we have for the United States," says Andreas Schleicher, the head of education indicators and analysis for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Paris-based group that administers PISA. The issue, he says, is that "the rate of improvement in other countries, in terms of getting more people into school and educating them well, is steeper."

For instance, the percentage of Americans who have completed at least a high school education has risen over time to 88 percent from 78 percent, according to the "Education at a Glance" report released last year by the OECD. The report compared the attainment of adults born between 1975-84 and those born a generation earlier, between 1933-42. But the data also show that while the United States has improved in that category, countries that were once behind now meet or exceed the U.S. standard. Some of them, such as Finland and South Korea, have "transformed themselves from countries where only a minority of students graduated from secondary school to those where virtually all students do," OECD officials noted in the report. The United States, in fact, has a history of performing poorly on international comparisons, which belies the notion that the skills of the country's students have eroded, says Tom Loveless, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, in Washington. In 1964, three decades before the inaugural TIMSS, the United States participated in the First International Mathematics Study, along with 11 other nations, including Australia, England, Finland, and Japan. The United States' 13-year-olds finished 11th out of 12 countries taking part, beating only Sweden, according to [an analysis by Loveless](#), who examined those results in a report published in 2010.

The idea that the United States has slipped educationally from a position of global dominance is a "myth," he says. Much of the press coverage following the release of the 1964 math results carried the same worried tone that TIMSS and PISA inspire today, notes Loveless, who went back and read those stories.

"People assumed our schools were number one, and they weren't," says Loveless. Unimpressive test scores periodically trigger American anxieties about educational atrophy, he argues, particularly when the U.S. leaders and the public feel challenged—as they did after the launch of Sputnik, or during Japan's rapid economic expansion of the 1970s and 1980s. The tendency is "to look at the American school system, and say, 'Something's wrong,'" Loveless observes.

Reason for Worry

Others say there are clear reasons to be worried about the United States' uninspiring international test results and their potential implications for the economy.

Economists have long seen a connection between the strength of nations' education systems and their long-term economic prosperity. While myriad factors, including the stability of a country's economic, political, and legal institutions, can contribute to national productivity, researchers say, an educated workforce is widely regarded as critical to producing innovations and allowing businesses to make use of them.

Over the past few years, some scholars have sought to draw a specific link between the kinds of academic skills that can be measured on international tests and nations' economic growth.

One of those researchers is [Eric A. Hanushek](#), a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, at Stanford University. While the average number of years of education has often been cited as an indicator of a country's "human capital," Hanushek and others have found cognitive skills in math and science have a stronger effect on a nation's economic growth rate in later years, particularly if the country has a relatively open economy.

By Hanushek's calculation, if the United States managed to boost its math performance by 40 points on PISA, to reach roughly the level of Canada, it would add between 7 percent and 11 percent, on average annually, to the nation's gross domestic product over the next 80 years. Projected over that time period, the increased productivity would amount to pumping an additional \$75 trillion into the U.S. economy, as measured in present value, or the current worth of the future additions to GDP. The United States' current annual GDP, by comparison, is roughly \$15 trillion.

"We face very, very different economic futures, depending on how our schools develop," Hanushek says. "Other nations are investing in the education of their populations, and they're doing other things to make their economies better. We're no longer going to be able to assume we're at the forefront of the world, in terms of our economy."

Others, such as Hal Salzman, an economist at Rutgers University, in New Brunswick, N.J., say there's little evidence that economic growth of that magnitude would result from improved educational performance. The link between the educational and economic prowess of nations, as measured by tests like TIMSS and PISA, says Salzman, is tenuous at best. The intense focus on that connection among U.S. business and political leaders in recent years "leads to a certain distortion about where to focus" efforts to improve education and workforce skills, he says.

"If the reason we're concerned about education is economic competition," Salzman says, it's worth noting that "a large portion of those high-ranking countries are economic train wrecks."

Salzman and Lindsay Lowell, of Georgetown University, in Washington, are the authors of research arguing that, despite concerns that the United States' K-12 system is not producing students with sufficient skills, specifically in math and science, American schools are in fact meeting and exceeding the current need of the U.S. labor market in that area. They examined data going back to the 1970s and concluded that the flow of students with math- and science-related skills who are choosing and staying in those fields is strong and has gotten stronger over time.

The exception was among high-achieving students, who appear to be choosing other careers—not because they lack the necessary skills, but because they seem to regard math- and science-focused careers as less attractive than other options, such as business, health care, and the law, the authors conclude.

Some observers suggest the United States is not keeping pace with the earlier educational standards it set, which proved so essential to its economic prosperity. In the 2008 book [The Race Between Education and Technology](#), Harvard University economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz argue that for most of the 20th century, advances in technology boosted the demand for educated American workers, and U.S. education kept pace, resulting in strong economic growth, shared across income groups.

But beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, educational attainment, as measured by high school and college completion, began to lag behind technological advances in that "race," they say, which led to reduced economic growth and to rising inequality. Among the factors contributing to that imbalance: large number of high school dropouts, students graduating from the secondary system without the preparation to succeed in college, and increased financial barriers to college, Goldin explains.

When the workforce cannot keep up with demands for skills, "those who can make the adjustments as well as those who gain the new skills are rewarded," Goldin and Katz write. "Others are left behind."

One of the persistent questions American policymakers ask: Should the United States be more concerned about raising the performance of high achievers than with raising the achievement of the vast pool of students performing at relatively low levels, by the measure of tests like TIMSS and PISA?

But some of the countries and jurisdictions that outperform the United States on various measures, such as Canada and Japan on the PISA reading scores, also have smaller gaps between their highest- and lowest-performing students, suggesting that their education systems do a better job in challenging students at all levels. The takeaway is that "you don't have to compromise equity to achieve high levels of success," says Schleicher, of the OECD.

Hanushek, who has described the question as a debate over "rocket scientists" vs. "education for all," has done research suggesting that improving the skills of students at the basic level and improving those of elite achievers are equally important to economic growth.

The Role of Culture

One of the most common mistakes that policymakers make in interpreting international test results is focusing on one aspect of high-performing nations' school systems and assuming it can be replicated wholesale in American schools, many analysts say. Loveless, of the Brookings Institution, sees that tendency in the view that national standards are driving high performance in

high-achieving countries, when in fact many low-scorers have national standards, too. Advocates of various policies tend to "seize on one country, one policy, and say that's why the test scores are going up, when in fact it was a dozen things," Loveless argues. "You have to look at policies over the full distribution of countries, if you want to get lessons." Any single-policy analysis also fails to take into account how great a role cultural norms play in shaping the effectiveness of educational strategies in high-performing nations, others say. For instance, when U.S. officials look at teaching methods in Japan, they're often surprised by the extent to which educators in that country allow students to struggle with problems, rather than help them, says Stigler, of UCLA. Americans look at those methods and wonder why U.S. instruction isn't modeled on that tough-love approach. But it's not that simple. Japanese cultural norms—transmitted by parents and others—create different expectations for what goes on in the classroom, Stigler says. American students "aren't socialized to struggle hard," says Stigler. "They're socialized to put their hands up and say, 'I don't know.'" While a Japanese parent would be inclined to tell a child's teacher, "Thank you for helping my kid struggle," Stigler suggests, an American parent might be more inclined to say, "Why are you torturing my kid?" Education, he says, "is a cultural system, and cultural systems evolve over time to satisfy the needs of a whole range of forces."

Shared Traits

Even so, some researchers see a number of shared characteristics among top-performing education systems. For example, high-scoring countries tend to recruit and retain talented teachers and help them continually improve their classroom skills; they also combine clear, ambitious academic standards for all students with a strong degree of autonomy at the local school level, argues Schleicher, [basing his analysis](#) on OECD data.

By looking at those characteristics, "you can actually go pretty far in understanding what makes education systems succeed, at least in the policy area, and derive a lot of lessons from them," he says.

Where, then, should U.S. policymakers direct their attention in gleaning lessons from abroad? Some say that the most important educational lessons are found at home, in Massachusetts and Minnesota, which have participated as individual states in the TIMSS and scored exceptionally well. Those states have roughly the population of high-performers like Finland and Singapore, those observers argue, and focusing on them removes many of the cultural and political variables across countries. Others say that one of the keys to understanding the success of high-performing countries is not to focus on specific policies, but on the quality of the work the United States puts into implementing policies that fit within its educational, political, and cultural context.

A number of scholars who have studied Asian nations' educational success, for example, say those countries do a much better job than the United States of improving and revising their policies in curriculum, instruction, and other areas, rather than simply focusing on the immediate results they bring.

"They really worry about quality and implementation," says Alan Ginsburg, a retired director of policy and program studies at the U.S. Department of Education, who has examined Asian education systems. "That's time-consuming. We don't do that. ... We worry much more about outcomes than about how to get there."

Stigler, the UCLA researcher, agrees. He cites the effect of an "improvement culture" that infuses Japan's education system—one that requires patience and attention to detail in putting new policies in place.

"The story of education reform in our country is that things get rolled out very quickly, and there's a lot of variability in how [they] get used," Stigler says. American school leaders "are on a short time frame. They want to know that it will improve results at the end of the year. It takes time and [patience] for that to happen."

Ginsburg says one lesson from high-performing jurisdictions is that U.S. policymakers and researchers should look to new approaches to building core math and science skills among a much broader swath of the student population, rather than just designing and implementing curriculum and instruction for students who are already on a college track.

American schools could do more to integrate algebra, geometry, statistics, and other core competencies across the curriculum—especially in such course areas as career-and-technical education—and give struggling and average performers more time to master those concepts, he argues. That approach would give students an understanding of the practical application of academic work, he says, and it would provide students, especially those who don't go to a four-year college right away, stronger workforce skills.

Too often, U.S. schools promise to make students "career- and college-ready," Ginsburg says, but they end up not ready for either one.

Goldin, the Harvard economist, says gauging what kinds of skills will prove most valuable to U.S. students is difficult, if not impossible. But evidence suggests that students need a strong educational foundation, without "breaks in the chain," from early education through college, she contends.

It also seems likely that demand will continue for skills that are not easily replaceable, such as analytical faculties, and the ability to think abstractly across disciplines, she says.

Such skills, Goldin points out, are not always easy to test, internationally or domestically—or to develop in the classroom. "It's much easier to teach with a textbook," she says. But "life is not about answering questions correctly. That's why it's difficult to teach it right."

Alan Ginsburg, Hal Salzman, and James Stigler all served on Education Week's advisory board for the 2012 edition of Quality Counts.

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Online Education Less Expensive Than Blended, Traditional Models

Education Week

By: Katie Ash

January 11, 2012

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2012/01/online_ed_less_expensive_than.html

[A new paper](#) from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute found that, on average, the per-pupil cost of educating a student through virtual education is significantly less than the national average for traditional brick-and-mortar schools. The report also found that fully virtual programs are less expensive, on average, than blended learning programs, but did not address whether student outcomes were equal.

The fourth in a series called Creating Sound Policy for Digital Learning ([we wrote about the first one here](#)), this paper found that virtual schools spend about \$5,100 to \$7,700 for each student, compared to \$7,600 to \$10,200 for blended learning programs, and \$10,000 per student for traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

However, authors of the paper, who gathered data from public documents as well as in interviews with entrepreneurs, policy experts, and school leaders, cautioned readers against settling on a price tag for online learning because of how widely the cost of virtual schooling varies from program to program. The cost of online learning also does not take into account student outcomes, the researchers warned.

The paper identified five cost drivers that outline the way different types of schools allocate resources: labor, content acquisition and development, technology and infrastructure, school operations, and student-support services. While more than half of traditional schools' financial resources typically go toward labor costs, virtual schools can often reduce those costs by increasing the student-teacher ratio or by reducing teacher salaries by hiring only part-time teachers or paraprofessionals, said the report, spending an average of \$2,600 per student, compared to an average of \$5,500 per pupil in a blended learning environment. Virtual schools can also cut costs on school operations, spending an average of \$1,000 per student vs. \$1,700 on average in a blended environment, which is only slightly lower than the average for traditional school models, said the report.

However, virtual school environments often spend more on content acquisition and development, as well as technology and infrastructure, found the report, spending \$800 and \$1,200 per student, respectively. This is above the average for blended learning programs, which spend about \$400 on content acquisition and \$500 on technology and infrastructure per pupil. When it comes to student-support services, such as guidance counselors, special education teachers, and other supports, virtual, blended, and traditional schools spent roughly the same amount of money per pupil, said the report.

Virtual education is still in a nascent stage, the report said, and therefore robust data about the quality of online and blended programs does not yet exist. Without that information, it is almost impossible to determine the productivity of the investments in virtual schools, said the report.

"Those pursuing online learning will see that, though there is no 'silver bullet' solution, there is evidence to suggest that virtual learning (both part-time and full-time) can provide significant opportunity to save money," the report said. "Future innovation should include careful tracking of quality and outcomes to continue to provide more robust options for those experimenting with lower-cost delivery of instruction."

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STATE NEWS

Idaho teacher evaluations to include parent input

Associated Press

By: Jessie L. Bonner

January 11, 2012

<http://www.idahostatesman.com/2012/01/11/1949020/idaho-teacher-evaluations-to-include.html>

At least half of an Idaho teacher's job evaluation will be based on student achievement starting July 1, and what parents think should start counting then too, the state Department of Education said Wednesday while clarifying a timeline for the new changes.

Under a plan crafted by public schools chief Tom Luna, at least 50 percent of all Idaho teaching evaluations performed after June 30 will be tied to the academic performance of students. But to some, the law was unclear as to when exactly parents become involved.

The state Department of Education asked lawmakers to further clarify when parental involvement will factor into the evaluations of educators and school administrators.

Lawmakers on the Senate Education Committee voted Wednesday to introduce a bill that says parental input also comes into play on the evaluations after June 30, though just how big a role moms and dads will have in grading their child's educators will be decided by school districts at the local level.

"It's really up to the districts to decide how to incorporate that and how much weighing to give it," said Jason Hancock, who serves as Luna's deputy chief of staff.

Senate Education Committee Chairman John Goedde, R-Coeur d'Alene, said he would try to hold a hearing on the legislation

Monday.

Parents across Idaho will have a role in grading the job performance of teachers and in whether an educator gets a raise, as part of a sweeping education overhaul that was approved during the 2011 Idaho Legislature.

School districts and public charter schools were required to develop merit pay plans that could be based on a variety of factors, including improved test scores and attendance rates. At least 29 school districts statewide developed teacher pay-for-performance plans based, at least in part, on parental involvement.

Some critics of Luna's education changes have questioned the larger role for parents, saying their involvement might be outside the control of teachers. Other concerns include whether a teacher might be afraid to discipline a student because parents will now have a say in evaluations and merit pay bonuses.

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South Dakota governor proposes bonuses for top teachers

Associated Press

By: Chet Brokaw

January 10, 2012

<http://www.ktvu.com/ap/ap/education/sd-governor-giving-state-of-state-speech-tuesday/nGJyj/>

PIERRE, S.D. — Gov. Dennis Daugaard opened South Dakota's legislative session Tuesday with a controversial proposal to give bonuses to the state's best teachers while eliminating tenure for new teachers.

The Republican governor also proposed bonuses for teachers who take hard-to-fill jobs in math and science and provided more details on his plan to train and attract workers to deal with a shortage of doctors, engineers, accountants, welders and others.

But his plan to give bonuses to the 20 percent of teachers designated the best in each school district drew the most attention, winning praise from Republicans and criticism from minority Democrats.

"These extremist ideas don't apply in South Dakota," said House Democratic Leader Bernie Hunhoff of Yankton, who argued the bonuses would lead to divisiveness as teachers were ranked. "They just don't work."

But Senate Republican Leader Russell Olson of Wentworth said he liked the plan because it used a free-market system to reward the best teachers and those who teach math and science.

"Now we're back and saying we want the best teachers to teach our children," Olson said.

Officials with the state's largest teachers' union, the South Dakota Education Association, said various versions of performance-based teacher bonuses have been tried in a few other states, but Daugaard's plan is flawed because it relies heavily on student testing and would undermine the spirit of collaboration in schools.

"The governor's proposal will do little to help school districts or teachers improve instruction, which is crucial to student learning, SDEA President Sandy Arseneault said.

Daugaard unveiled his plans in his hour-long, annual State of the State speech. He said South Dakota students continue to score above the national average on achievement tests, but their scores are not improving even though the state has more teachers and fewer students than it did 40 years ago.

"We cannot simply pour more money into the same old system," Daugaard said, noting the state added nearly 900 teachers while enrollment dropped by 50,000 students over the past four decades. "We must focus on improving results, and spend creatively and strategically to achieve results. The key to high achievement is great teaching and we will invest the dollars it will take to make a difference."

Beginning in the fall of 2014, school districts will be asked to identify their top 20 percent of teachers under a new evaluation system that will rank them based on students' test scores and other factors, Daugaard said. Top teachers will receive annual bonuses of \$5,000 each, costing the state about \$10 million a year, he said.

The state also would give each math and science teacher in middle and high school a yearly bonus of \$3,500 beginning in fall 2013 to deal with shortages in those fields. Those bonuses would cost the state \$ 5 million a year.

The final piece of the plan would end tenure in July for any teacher who does not already have it. Currently, any South Dakota teacher who has worked more than three consecutive years in a district has tenure and can be fired only for poor performance, gross immorality or other misconduct.

Teachers who already have tenure would not lose it, but Daugaard said new teachers don't need the protection because they will be evaluated fairly under the new system.

Hunhoff said schools are already hard pressed to deal with funding shortfalls, and Daugaard's apparent embrace of some

conservative moves that have been tried in other states won't help.

"It's a war on schools at the very worst possible time when schools already feel under assault," he said.

Daugaard also asked lawmakers to support his plans for easing a shortage in a variety of professional and technical occupations in South Dakota, which has an unemployment rate of 4.3 percent, about half the national rate.

Those plans include expanded college programs to train more doctors, physicians' assistants, and other health care workers. Programs at technical schools also would be expanded to train more welders and machinists.

South Dakota currently has 1,466 unfilled jobs in engineering, information technology, accounting and other skilled fields, so the state needs to attract workers from other states to take those jobs, Daugaard said. The state will work with businesses and a private workforce recruiter to seek workers from outside the state, but only for jobs that have been unfilled for at least 30 days so South Dakotans have first shot at them, he said.

"As skilled workers in other states face high unemployment and an uncertain future, South Dakota can offer them better. We can be their land of opportunity," the governor said.

South Dakota also must set up programs to attract more doctors, nurses and other health care workers to rural areas, Daugaard said. Part of that effort should increase financial incentives given to nurses and others who agree to work in rural areas, he said.

Senate Democratic Leader Jason Frerichs of Wilmot said he likes some of Daugaard's ideas to develop the workforce.

"Economic development is all about education and the quality of life, and we are encouraged by his acknowledgement that we need to modernize our efforts," Frerichs said.

Olson said Republicans like the governor's long-term plan to develop more skilled workers.

"It starts off with some vision," Olson said.

Daugaard also said he will submit bills and take other steps to get rid of more than 400 unneeded sections of law and 1,100 state rules.

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Michigan's Muskegon Public School Superintendent: Online learning important option for local students

The Muskegon Chronicle The Muskegon Chronicle

By: Jon Felske

January 11, 2012

http://www.mlive.com/news/muskegon/index.ssf/2012/01/superintendent_online_learning.html

Editor's note: Jon Felske has been superintendent of Muskegon Public Schools since July 2011. Over the past 12 years he has also served as superintendent at Pinconning Area Schools, Godwin Heights Public Schools, and Wyoming Public Schools. He has a bachelor's degree from Albion College and a Masters and Education Specialist Degrees from Saginaw Valley State University.

Online learning for students is one of the fastest growing trends in the educational use of technology today in the United States. A recent national survey estimated that more than a million students took online courses during the past school year. Online learning is the current form of a long line of former educational uses to achieve high school credit including correspondence courses, education television, video conferencing and distance learning.

Online learning is now a Michigan Merit Curriculum Graduation Requirement for students in Michigan to receive their local district high school diploma. The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) defines online learning as a "structured learning activity that utilizes technology with Internet-based tools and resources as the delivery method for instruction, research, assessment and communication." MDE's rationale for requiring an online experience for all students before graduation is that online learning will allow students to become familiar with a key means of increasing their own learning skills and knowledge. Online learning will also prepare students for the demands they will encounter in higher education, the workplace and in personal life-long learning.

Current state pupil accounting rules only allow local school districts to enroll students in up to two online courses per semester. Gov. Rick Snyder has proposed giving districts more control over student seat time regulations which would allow for a learning model which the governor calls, "any time, any place, any way, any page" education.

Online learning today comes in a variety of instructional formats. Each emphasizes different levels of engagement between the student and the highly qualified teacher of record. The four most common formats include:

- Teacher-led. The online teacher provides the students with the organization, direction and content for the class, while also producing the assignments, leading class discussion, grading student work and administering tests.
- Blended instruction. Teachers in blended instruction provide traditional face-to-face instruction along with designed online educational experiences that extend beyond the classroom setting and allow students to work in virtual teams with students from other classes, schools or countries.

- Teacher-facilitated. This approach allows teachers to work with one or more students to provide coach-like assistance for students who are taking individual classes. The teacher facilitator works to ensure that students are engaged and making academic progress in their class while providing content-related instructional assistance.

- Self-paced. Students access online classes with no teacher involvement or assistance. Students in self-paced online classes need to be highly independent learners who can demonstrate self-initiative and require little guidance, motivation or direction.

Students in the neighborhood public school districts in Muskegon County enjoy a wide range of online learning options. In addition to specific online courses that may involve unique or advanced subject areas, students also access online classes after school to recover failed credits. Online learning is definitely meeting students' needs and enhancing education in a very real way.

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Colorado considering regulation of online schools

Associated Press

By: Staff

January 11, 2012

http://www.edweek.org/dd/articles/2012/01/11/486340coonlinechools_ap.html

DENVER (AP) — The Colorado Board of Education is considering new rules for online schools that would require them to disclose more about their finances and follow the same rules as regular schools following scathing reports from auditors and regulators.

The board is expected to vote on rules Wednesday that would require more state scrutiny. According to the Denver Post (<http://bit.ly/xzVL4X>), the rules are being considered because of a law passed last year by Colorado lawmakers.

The Department of Education said it will also scrutinize new applications for online schools.

"We're trying to be much more rigorous upfront about quality and best practices so we see hopefully stronger programs going forward," said program director Amy Anderson.

Each online school must be authorized by an established school district, which oversees the online school.

About 2 percent of Colorado public school students in kindergarten through 12th grade now attend school online, taking all their courses over the Internet. Some of the schools are for-profit businesses. Some lawmakers contend they boost enrollment rates before an Oct. 1 count date to increase the state funding they get.

Records show that in 2010, 15,249 pupils attended online schools.

In 2007, then Gov. Bill Ritter signed a measure that set standards for online school courses after a critical state audit said the results were not being tracked. Another measure he signed regulates how online educators are paid.

Reviews of the 2005-06 school year by the state auditor and the Education Department said at least one school could not prove how much time students were spending in online courses and had co-mingled taxpayer money with private-school tuition.

If approved, the new rules would be a start toward fixing some of those problems, said board member Elaine Gantz Berman.

"They would definitely be stronger than the previous rules. We are definitely moving in the right direction, but until we eliminate the single-count day, we can't really solve this," Berman said.

Online school leaders say attrition rates reflect the often-challenged and troubled students they serve. Students who do remain in online schools tend to do worse on standardized tests than their brick-and-mortar counterparts.

Some online schools are operated within a single school district, but 22 can enroll students statewide.

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Florida's school system tumbles out of the top 10

Tampa Bay Times

By: Ron Matus

January 12, 2012

<http://www.tampabay.com/news/floridas-school-system-tumbles-out-of-the-top-10/1210216>

Florida's education system falls in rank from No. 5 to No. 11 this year due to budget cuts and stalling national test scores, according to a report card out today by Education Week.

Florida's education system fell in rank from No. 5 to No. 11 this year due to budget cuts and stalling national test scores, according to a closely watched annual report released today.

The report card from the *Education Week* newspaper, which was provided in advance to the *Tampa Bay Times* and other news outlets, is another recent sign that Florida's education star may be dimming.

On the academic achievement portion of the report, Florida dropped from No. 6 to No. 12.

On the finance portion, it stumbled from No. 31 to No. 39.

The latter rankings are based on 2009 figures, so they're likely to get worse in future reports. The Legislature cut another \$1.3 billion from schools last year.

"It's not all about money, but at some point, it does take money to run a school system and a high quality one," said Colleen

Wood, founder of 50th No More, a state group dedicated to increased education spending.

"Obviously it's bad for our children, it's bad for our state," Senate Democratic Leader Nan Rich said of the latest numbers. "You have to put your money where your mouth is."

Wood, Rich and other critics of Florida's accountability system, shaped in large part by former Gov. Jeb Bush, said the report should also prompt Gov. Rick Scott and Republican lawmakers to reconsider the state's vision of education reform. But supporters argued the opposite, saying the state needed to stay on the same path with renewed vigor.

"For the last decade, Sunshine State students have illustrated that progress is achievable under a system of high expectations, accountability for schools and an array of education choices for families," Patricia Levesque, who directs two Bush education foundations, said in a written statement. The report shows "Florida's work is not done."

Education Week ranks states in six broad areas, looking at a comprehensive list of statistics and policies. It awards a grade and ranking for each.

Florida's overall grade fell from B- to C+. The national average was C. Pennsylvania was the only other state to fall out of the Top 10, falling four spots to No. 13.

Top state officials keep close tabs on the rankings. And happily tout them when the results are upbeat.

Last year, Scott quickly congratulated teachers, students and parents. This year, his office did not respond to a request for comment Wednesday and said it would likely release a statement today.

Scott is urging lawmakers to restore \$1 billion in education funding this year after he backed last year's cuts.

In the K-12 achievement category, Florida earned a C-, down from a C+ last year.

Ed Week looks at three academic indicators: graduation rates; college-caliber Advanced Placement exams; and math and reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a well respected test better known by its acronym, NAEP. The ranking formula considers performance and progress for all of them.

In many respects, Florida's overall performance isn't stellar - and hasn't been for a long time. But progress over the past decade allowed it to storm the rankings, rising from No. 34 in 2007 to No. 8 in 2010 and No. 5 last year.

The latest report, though, follows sobering news from November. Florida's NAEP scores, for years the most dramatically rising in the country, had not moved much for the second testing cycle in a row. No surprise, then, that Florida fell in all 14 NAEP-related categories tracked by *Ed Week*.

Kathleen Shanahan, who chairs the state Board of Education, questioned the NAEP results and by extension the rankings. She noted that some states exclude much higher percentages of potentially struggling students - students with disabilities and English language learners - from taking the NAEP than Florida does.

On the fourth-grade reading test, for example, Maryland's inclusion rate for disabled students was 31 percent. Florida's was 89 percent.

"I am questioning whether NAEP is apples to apples," Shanahan said.

Cornelia Orr, executive director of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees NAEP, said the board is pushing states to beef up inclusion rates. But she also said the number of excluded students is small - and does not make a big difference in a state's overall score.

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Louisiana Board picks White as new education superintendent

Baton Rouge Advocate

By: Will Sentell

January 12, 2012

<http://theadvocate.com/home/1778606-125/board-picks-white-as-new.html>

Gov. Bobby Jindal's choice for state superintendent of education was approved Wednesday by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

John White, 36, who is superintendent of the Recovery School District, was endorsed by BESE at a special meeting.

Jindal has backed White for months. However, the governor only gained enough votes for his choice after campaigning for several BESE contenders in last year's elections.

Jindal now enjoys a clear majority on the 11-member board.

The superintendent recommends and carries out public school policies that affect an estimated 668,000 students.

White has been superintendent of the RSD since May, which means he oversees troubled public schools in New Orleans, Baton Rouge and elsewhere.

Before that he was deputy chancellor of the New York City Department of Education.

White is from Washington, D.C. He has a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Virginia and a master's degree in public administration from New York University.

Ollie Tyler has been serving as acting superintendent since Paul Pastorek quit the job last year.

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New Mexico issues A-F grades for public schools

Associated Press

By: Barry Massey

January 10, 2012

<http://www.whiotv.com/ap/ap/education/nm-issues-a-f-grades-for-public-schools/nGKKD/>

SANTA FE, N.M. — Nearly two-thirds of New Mexico's schools received a grade of C or better under new ratings announced Tuesday by the Public Education Department.

The state plans to use the A to F grades to replace a federally mandated school rating system that many educators consider unfair because it takes a pass-or-fail approach based on student testing in a single year.

"Thanks to our straightforward new A-F grading system, parents, teachers, and community leaders have a much clearer understanding of where our schools are succeeding and where we need to focus our efforts and our resources to improve," Gov. Susana Martinez said in a statement.

The grades are based on standardized tests taken by students and year-to-year growth of student performance in reading and mathematics. Other factors include the high school graduation rate.

Nearly 90 percent of New Mexico schools failed last year to make "adequate yearly progress" under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The Martinez administration has asked the U.S. Education Department to allow New Mexico to use its grading system, which was approved by the Legislature last year, rather than continue with the federal model.

Schools will receive final grades this summer, and those will take into account student testing to be done this spring. The Martinez administration proposes to use the grades to allocate money to help boost school performance and offer bonuses to highly qualified teachers willing to work in struggling schools. The governor also wants to provide financial incentives to the highest-performing schools.

According to the preliminary school grades released by the department:

- 73 schools, or 9 percent, received an A.
- 191 schools, or 23 percent, got a B.
- 266 schools, or 32 percent, received a C.
- 208 schools, or 25 percent, got a D.
- 89 schools, or 11 percent, received an F.

Of the schools getting a C or better, 79 percent of those were considered failing under the federal rating system last year.

"Every community in New Mexico now has the opportunity to see what's happening in our schools and how they can help make sure those schools improve by this summer," said Public Education Department Secretary Hanna Skandera. "For the first time, instead of a shallow snapshot from a single test score, we can measure our schools by how much our students are improving in the classroom."

The department released the new ratings on its website, providing a grade card report for individual schools.

Under the federal system, a school will not meet the "adequate yearly progress" goal if any one of several subgroups of students — black, white, Hispanic, American Indian, economically disadvantaged or poor, special education and students with limited English language skills — fail to meet performance or participation targets on tests.

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