

From: [Alexis Franz \(alexis@afloridapromise.org\)](mailto:alexis@afloridapromise.org) <alexis@afloridapromise.org>

To: [Alexis Franz \(alexis@afloridapromise.org\)](mailto:alexis@afloridapromise.org) <alexis@afloridapromise.org>

CC:

Date: Thu, 8/25/2011 10:16:24 AM

Subject: Foundation for Florida's Future, Key Reads: 8/25/11

Foundation for Florida's Future, Key Reads: 8/25/11

For more education news, visit www.TheEdFly.com.

NATIONAL NEWS

- 1) [Back-to-School Special: Arne Duncan Goes Off Script](#); Rotherham – Time
- 2) [Getting At-Risk Teens to Graduation](#); Kronholz – Education Next
- 3) [At-Risk Students Face E-Learning Challenges](#); Ash – Education Week
- 4) [ED Offers SIG Schools Extra Time for Teacher Evaluation Systems](#); Klein – Education Week

FLORIDA NEWS

- 5) [Jeb Bush Plays Education Policy Confidant to Fla.'s Gov. Scott](#); Cavanagh – Education Week
- 6) [Can Technology Solve School Funding?](#); O'Connor – State Impact
- 7) [Pasco high schools allow AP classes to grow without class size restrictions](#); Solochek – St. Petersburg Times

STATE NEWS

- 8) [For New York State Teachers' Union, a Victory on Evaluations](#); Otterman – New York Times
- 9) [Ohio: Charter schools partnering with the Cleveland school district score well on state report card](#); O'Donnell – Cleveland Plain Dealer

NATIONAL NEWS

Back-to-School Special: Arne Duncan Goes Off Script

Time

August 25, 2011

By: Andrew J. Rotherham

<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2090299-2,00.html>

As a new school year begins, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan plans to use waivers to rewrite parts of the nation's signature federal education law, whose reauthorization has been stalled in Congress. Meanwhile, states are struggling to meet their ambitious Race to the Top goals as they look for ways to cut spending. I sat down with the former head of the Chicago school system to talk about these issues as well as how he pressured the Iowa governor not to cut his state's pre-kindergarten program and set a low bar for the academic side of college athletics.

Let's start with your plan to issue waivers to allow states more flexibility around parts of No Child Left Behind. What should we expect?

A high bar. Maintaining accountability, high expectations, doing creative stuff around teacher and principal evaluation, and looking at under-performing schools — the trade-off for that high bar is a lot more autonomy and a lot more flexibility [for states and schools]. ([Read about the seven things you need to know about a school before you enroll your child.](#))

How do you respond to critics who say that linking waivers to conditions [such as improving teacher evaluations or data systems] goes beyond the authority you have under the law?

Secretary Spellings had waiver authority and used it. We're doing the same thing, and we're absolutely confident in our legal authority. I know not everyone in Congress is thrilled, but I've talked to 45 or 46 governors, almost every governor, Republican, Democrat, everyone is saying, "At least someone in Washington is listening to the real world." Haley Barbour in Mississippi said, "Thank God someone is listening." There isn't one governor saying, "I'm not interested" or "Why are you doing this?"

I hope this will be a bridge or transition to reauthorization [of the No Child law]. I wish we would have gotten there, hasn't happened yet, but I hope it will. But it would be the height of arrogance and tone-deafness to just sit here and do nothing when you have a law that simply isn't working for children, their schools, and teachers.

There is a lot of concern that these new waivers could lessen the pressure, particularly in diverse suburban schools, to improve outcomes for minority kids. How are you going to continue to ensure that minority kids don't get overlooked as a result of the new flexibility?

Where you're looking at large gaps, whether it's inner-city, suburban, or rural, and whether it's minority students, poor students,

or English-language learners, we're very serious about [closing those gaps] and are going to maintain that commitment. ([Read about Dr. Drew's advice about sending your child to college.](#))

Can you commit to minority parents that suburban schools will not get a free pass, that their children will still be in the accountability system?

All students will remain in the accountability system.

What's your take on the so-called super committee or Super Congress that will meet to help address the debt and deficit in the wake of the debt ceiling deal? Are there any education programs that should be cut?

We've cut every single year. We've cut hundreds of millions of dollars out of programs. And, absolutely, we should be looking at things that aren't working and be willing to change, but we've done an extraordinary amount of that already. At the end of the day, to think that you should do less early-childhood education or less K-12 reform or provide less access to higher education, I can't support that.

What about the states? Are you going to be pushing them to do more with less?

Everyone has to do more with less. You're seeing states that are still making real progress despite the tough budget times. But I always say that budgets reflect not just numbers but our values. And if our budgets don't reflect the value we put on education, how important we think children are, how important it is that we give every child a world-class education, then, yes, I will challenge that.

For instance, Iowa was thinking about cutting back on early-childhood spending, and I challenged them not to do that. The governor, to his credit, came out a couple of days afterward and said they were maintaining their commitment to early-childhood education.

[Read about why Duncan shouldn't be dissing Texas.](#)

How durable are the Administration's initiatives? If the President is not reelected, will they survive?

What we've tried to do very strategically is empower local leaders to be creative. When you see 45 states raise standards, that's not because of a mandate from the federal government. That's because governors and state education chiefs finally were honest that they've been lying to children and families for a long time.

You've seen more change on education in the past two and a half years than you have probably in the past two or three decades. We have a long way to go and we have to keep pushing, but for all the challenges, I'm extraordinarily optimistic about where we're going because of the courage and because of the leadership and the creativity, not here in Washington but out around the country.

Using stimulus money, you've been getting states to compete for grant money through the Race To The Top reform initiative. How's it going? What are you excited about? Worried about?

The amount of change we've seen around the country is breathtaking. We've seen as much change if not more in states that did not receive funding as in states that did. So as much money as it was, in the end it wasn't about the money. It was about creating the space and the opportunity for folks to do what they knew was the right thing for children — and for whatever reason historically just didn't get done.

The hard work is obviously still ahead of us, and we're going to challenge ourselves to be a better partner to states. ([Read about whether Duncan will shake up America's schools.](#))

What about states like Delaware that are pushing back timelines on Race to the Top goals?

You have to watch that carefully, but these systems have been broken for 30, 40, 50 years, and what I'm most interested in is fixing that. If it takes another three months or six months, I'm open to that. But I'm not open to it taking forever.

So would you pull Race to the Top money from a state?

Absolutely. No question. But as long as folks are working hard in good faith, I'm good with that.

How should Americans think about teachers' unions and ways they're an asset or a hindrance?

What I think people don't understand is that when you look this as a monolith, you really miss the complexities. There are places doing amazing work, and there are other places that need to push harder. But I'm not just asking the unions. I'm asking management. Superintendents in too many places have been part of the problem, and school boards in too many places have been part of the problem. Does student achievement have to be at the heart of collective bargaining in union leaders' minds? Absolutely. But it also has to be at the heart of school boards' and superintendents' minds. The lack of courage and leadership on the management side has been as big a problem, if not bigger. The average length of [an urban] superintendent is two and a half years. I was in Chicago for seven and a half years and was the longest serving big city superintendent in the country. That's not a problem with the union. That's a problem with school boards that don't know how to attract and retain talent. We have to

challenge everyone and get everyone to move. ([Read a quick bio over Arne Duncan.](#))

You're a former college athlete. College sports scandals are in the news lately, Ohio State and now Miami. How big of a problem do we have in college athletics?

You have to have consequences. And not only historically has there been no consequence for bad behavior, there has actually been lots of incentives for bad behavior. If you do the wrong thing, you hurt kids but you win more games and leave a program in ruins as you catapult to the next job and get a salary increase.

The NCAA recently passed our recommendation — it's frankly a low bar — that if you're not graduating half your players, you can't compete in the [post-season college basketball] tournament. Everyone goes to a Division I school because they want to compete in the tournament. If you take that away, that opportunity and that revenue, it goes a long way to checking some of this.

In college sports, the only people who aren't making money are the athletes. Should student athletes be paid?

I don't think so. They are getting a \$20-, \$30-, \$40-, \$50,000 scholarship to get a great education. Where they are taking advantage of that opportunity, where they have adults who actually care about helping them do that, then that education for the rest of their lives is worth millions of dollars. So I don't think they need to be paid. They need to be getting their college degree. And they need to have adults around them for whom that's important.

There is a raging debate in education about the role that the substantial levels of child poverty in this country play in education. How should Americans think about that?

I come from Chicago where 85% of our students live below the poverty line. If children can't see the blackboard, they're going to have a hard time learning so we have to get them eyeglasses. We used to get literally tens of thousands of kids eyeglasses every year. If children aren't fed and are hungry, they're going to have a hard time concentrating, so we fed tens of thousands of kids three meals a day. We had a couple of thousand kids we were particularly worried about so very quietly we would send them home Friday afternoons with a backpack full of food because we worried about them not eating over the weekend.

Should schools have to do that? No, in a perfect world they wouldn't have to do that. But we have to deal with reality and whether it's eyeglasses, food, or physical and emotional safety, we have to address all of those things. And schools can't do it alone. Non-profits, faith-based institutions — all of us have to work together.

All else equal, should we expect more of schools?

We should expect more of society.

Andrew J. Rotherham, who writes the blog [Eduwonk](#), is a co-founder and partner at Bellwether Education, a nonprofit working to improve educational outcomes for low-income students. School of Thought, his education column for TIME.com, appears every Thursday.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Getting At-Risk Teens to Graduation

Education Next

By: June Kronholz

Fall 2011 / Vol. 11, No. 4

<http://educationnext.org/getting-at-risk-teens-to-graduation/>

Blended learning offers a second chance

Eighteen-year-old Tyriq Jones was fairly blunt about the mess he had gotten himself into before transferring to the Hampton, Virginia, online school where I approached him one chilly day this spring. "I got in trouble. I was playing around. I got backed up" in high school, he said. He had failed three classes in his junior year and, faced with the prospect of repeating a year, probably would have dropped out instead, he told me. "I didn't want that kind of pressure."

People who deal with at-risk teenagers say dropping out is not an event; it's a process. Youngsters miss school and get "backed up" in class, so they miss more school because they're bewildered or embarrassed, and fall further behind. Seeing few ways to recover, "they just silently drop out," said Richard Firth, who showed me around the Hampton school and two others in Richmond that are using online learning to derail the cycle.

In the three years the 75-seat Hampton Performance Learning Center has been open, it claims to have graduated 91 students. There's a waiting list for admission, so the school opened a second shift, which also is near capacity. Sherri Pritchard, the school's social-studies "learning facilitator"—there are no teachers and no principal here—said 95 percent of her online students pass Virginia's end-of-course history test, which would put them well ahead of both the Hampton school district's and state's pass rates.

And Tyriq: He has only a C average after a year at the Hampton PLC, he said, but he graduated in June—on time—and plans to

enlist in the Army, his goal all along.

The New Alternative

Online K–12 education made its appearance in the mid-1990s, largely as a resource for bright students who had no access to accelerated classes. It moved next into core high-school courses where districts found themselves with teacher shortages—math, science, foreign languages—and has been growing bumptiously, and in a dozen directions, ever since.

The International Association for K–12 Online Learning, which goes by the acronym iNACOL, estimates that 82 percent of school districts now offer at least one online course. Thirty-two states have virtual schools where online offerings range from one class to an entire high-school curriculum, according to an annual report on online learning published by the Evergreen Education Group, a Colorado consultancy. At the Florida Virtual School alone, students collectively took 220,000 classes online in 2009–10 (see “[Florida’s Online Option](#),” *features*, Summer 2009). Twenty-six states have at least one full-time online school, and perhaps 225,000 youngsters were full-time online students this year, says John Watson, editor of the Evergreen report.

Two of the fastest-growing trends in online education converge in the Performance Learning Center project, which is why I called Communities in Schools, a nonprofit dropout-prevention program that devised the model in Georgia in 2002.

The PLCs call themselves an alternative to traditional schools and distance themselves from the credit-recovery factories that many districts have opened to boost their graduation rates ahead of state and federal sanctions. (Indeed, a few PLC students enroll for the chance to accelerate.) But the schools do offer struggling kids like Tyriq a chance to make up courses they failed in traditional teacher-student classrooms, which puts them at the nexus of a national debate. States are raising their graduation standards, but returning kids to the classroom for a second attempt at algebra often is counterproductive—Why should we suppose they’ll understand equations any better the second time around?—and gobbles up teacher time.

The second trend is the “blended” approach, combining online learning with a teacher-led classroom (see “[Future Schools](#),” *features*, Summer 2011). Most instruction is online in the PLC model, but a teacher-coach is there to answer questions, direct projects, and keep kids on track.

Communities in Schools linked those two trends with the small-school idea and has expanded the project to seven states and 33 schools. PLCs have only four or five classrooms, four or five teachers, and fewer than 100 students. Teachers are district employees who are paid the district scale and apply for their jobs. Kids remain part of their home schools, which has raised graduation statistics for those schools and generated buy-in from their administrators.

PLCs generally receive the same per-pupil funding as traditional schools. Their biggest expense, after salaries, goes to licensing fees for the online curriculum, which Richard Firth, the Virginia PLC director, put at about \$35,000 a year per school. Start-up costs for computers, teacher training, and to carve new schools out of old facilities can be a showstopper for financially pressed school districts. Richmond, which is building its first new high school in 40 years, plans to include some multipurpose rooms that could be used for a future PLC.

The only outside funding comes from Communities in Schools, which pays the salary of a services coordinator, who links youngsters with housing, day-care, medical, and other service providers and helps them plan what they do after graduation. The services coordinator at the Richmond career-center PLC keeps a closet of baby clothes in her office for students whose own children can attend Head Start or day care downstairs.

Almost disarmingly, the PLCs reach out to youngsters that schools typically find the most troublesome. Sherman Curl, the academic coordinator—i.e., principal—at the Adult Career Development Center PLC in Richmond, handed me a brochure describing the students for whom the PLC is a good fit. Kids with “poor attendance,” “excessive tardiness,” “academic failure,” “apathy,” “social issues,” low motivation, and such “challenges to success” as pregnancy and poverty, it read.

In a summary of its 2009–10 academic year, Virginia’s Communities in Schools reported that one-third of the students at its four PLCs were at least two years behind in academic credits when they arrived. They were a year or two older than their conventional-school peers and, in the previous year, averaged six suspensions and 24 absences each at their former schools. Several youngsters told me they’d fallen in with the wrong crowd at their old schools, or they felt bullied and isolated. “I started messing up,” a chatty 18-year-old named Chelsie Saunders told me at the Hampton PLC, which is housed in a modern teen center, complete with pool tables, a basketball court, a coffee bar, and an airy television lounge with leather sofas.

“These are kids who never made it in a comprehensive school,” said Wes Hamner, the academic coordinator at the Richmond Technical Center PLC, which occupies one floor of a sprawling trades-training campus in Richmond’s industrial district.

For all that, the three PLCs I visited were remarkably quiet and orderly: There wasn’t much chatter about what kids were learning, but there wasn’t any catcalling, hallway scuffling, or acting out in class, either. Hamner pointed out that there’s no security at his school and that the lockers don’t even have locks. Teachers sat in the back or in a corner of the classrooms, while students sat at computers, wearing headsets.

Teaching to the Student

At Hampton, I asked Pritchard, the social-studies facilitator, how she knew what her students were doing, so she opened a dashboard on her computer. It showed that on computer 3, a student was working on a U.S. history unit, or “module,” on civil

rights. The teenager on computer 6 was working on a module on imperialism for the same course, and the student on computer 7 was doing a review and practice test on the executive branch of the U.S. government.

Most PLCs, including those in Virginia, use NovaNET, an online curriculum that is marketed by Pearson Education Inc. The program tests a student at the end of each lesson, module, and course, and lets those who pass their tests with at least an 80 percent move on. For those who don't pass, the computer singles out the content they seemed not to understand, reteaches it, and retests.

Kids like the immediate feedback, Katherine Fox, the academic coordinator at Hampton, told me: "It's difficult for them to wait for success. Kids want to move on." A mop-haired boy named Michael told me that he used to obsess over test questions at his conventional school and couldn't force himself to move ahead. The NovaNET practice tests and make-up tests relieved him of that anxiety, he said, as he pulled certificates from his backpack to show that he had completed two business classes, oceanography, and biology. "No one gets left behind here," he said.

Back on Pritchard's dashboard, meanwhile, I could see that the student on computer 1 was using an open-source educational website called SAS Curriculum Pathways to research voting rights for the government class, while the student on computer 2 was researching Appomattox on SAS for history class. Most Hampton PLC computers can access only NovaNET; the few that can access SAS can't go any further than research sites to which SAS provides a link.

At the career center PLC in Richmond, which is housed on the top floor of a 1920s-era school built for the city's elite black students, science facilitator Patricia Sessions showed me more. A "pacing sheet," a sort of minimum speed limit set by the state education department, suggested that teachers should expect to devote three weeks to a unit on biochemical processes, part of the biology curriculum. But when Sessions opened the computer file of a student named Trish, it showed that Trish had finished the unit in a week. She'd spent 26 minutes on an online lesson about atoms and molecules, and got a 90 on the test. She'd spent an hour on the properties-of-water lesson and another hour on acids and bases, and got 80 on both.

Teachers told me that most NovaNET courses are comparable to textbook-based courses in length and content—a comeback to critics who talk of watered-down curricula at alternative schools—but that many students move through them more quickly, and often finish high school a semester early. "I'm constantly working rather than waiting," explained a tattooed girl named Shaina at the Richmond Tech school.

Pritchard told me that she started the school year with students grouped largely by subject—say, geography in one period, government in another. But as the year went on, and students progressed at different speeds, classes became more diverse. In any class period now, she could have youngsters working on either semester of any of four subjects.

As students finish courses, they can move to another classroom to work on courses they may find slower going. If they earn enough credits to graduate before the school year is over, the services coordinator steers them to mentorships, trade training, or jobs. Sessions, who was playing Mendelssohn in her otherwise-silent classroom as her students worked, said she started the year with 20 kids in her afternoon class and was down to 8 by late March.

All that movement precludes lectures or class discussions. Teachers told me that anywhere from 60 to 90 percent of the work in their classrooms is done online, with work sheets, projects, one-on-one meetings, and, for seniors, a research report and presentation accounting for the rest. The walls of Pritchard's classroom were ringed with poster-board projects on the Zhou Dynasty, the Battle of Fort Fisher, and the roles of the secretary of defense and the U.S. Department of Education, among others. It wasn't AP material, perhaps, but it showed persistence and attention to detail that are not always common in city schools. Last year, the whole school read the same book, *Facing the Lion*, and used it as a springboard for cross-disciplinary studies.

The students I talked with said they didn't miss discussions or were self-aware enough to know that lectures didn't fit their learning style. "I wouldn't be listening anyway," Tyriq told me; "I'm not a person to talk," said another 18-year-old named Dashawn. Instead, kids said they liked the anonymity and independence of working online. "I like being in my own bubble," Chelsie Saunders told me in Hampton: "I don't like waiting on people" on some lessons and "I don't worry about people getting frustrated with me" for working slowly on others.

A Promising Start

The PLCs take youngsters who have at least attempted 9th grade, plus a few overage 8th graders. But most kids arrive in 10th or 11th grade when they realize they're not on track to graduate. For admission, they must score at an 8th-grade level on standardized reading and math tests (the Richmond Tech PLC raised that to 9th grade because it had so many applicants), pass an interview, and sign an achievement contract that also commits them to attend a daily meeting called Morning Motivation. Each gets a learning plan that plots an individual path to graduation and then to a trade program, a job, or college.

Yvonne Brandon, superintendent of Richmond City Schools, expressed enthusiasm for online learning when we spoke. "We have to transform our ideas of what learning looks like," she said. But PLC staffers told me that the districts sometimes struggle to understand them. Grade levels, quarterly grades, GPAs, and the academic calendar are fuzzy at a move-at-your-own-pace school: Youngsters told me how many credits they had, not whether they were juniors or seniors.

Students graduate when they earn the state-mandated 22 credits, but they can't receive diplomas until spring. Firth, the Virginia PLC director, said he recently learned that some of those graduates-without-diplomas were being counted as absent by the

district because, well, they weren't in school. "We're so outside the box and education is so inside the box," Hamner sighed.

The data on online education are still pretty equivocal. There are no data on what kind of student performs best in an online class, although everyone I talked with assumed it probably was the independent achiever, because that kind of student performs well in any setting. There are few quality measures, although Michael Horn, executive director for education at the Innosight Institute, a Mountain View, California, think tank, points out that we don't know how to measure quality in face-to-face classes, either.

Barbara Means of SRI International, a research institute in Menlo Park, California, told me that much of the ambiguity is because state data systems aren't set up to compare online learners to in-class learners. They don't record which students taking the state's standardized math tests completed them at the end of an online course, for example, and which took them after a face-to-face class. Most states don't keep student-level data, so researchers also can't compare similar students at a full-time virtual school and those in a full-time conventional one.

Means reviewed 12 years of literature on online learning and said that from the limited data they presented she concluded that "there wasn't much difference" in the educational outcomes of kids who studied online and those who studied in a classroom. That suggests that schools should consider some other reason if they're thinking of shifting curriculum or students online, she said: Perhaps it's cheaper or there are social benefits, like making school more flexible for working students or for those with infants.

Means also surveyed the literature comparing outcomes at traditional schools to outcomes at schools that blended face-to-face and online teaching. Youngsters in the blended environments, with a teacher and technology, did "significantly better," she said. But that may be because blended schools offered youngsters more learning time, more content, or perhaps both, rather than because of the different approach to teaching.

Credit-recovery and online programs have been accused of low standards and a weak-tea curriculum, anything to get kids into the graduation statistics, critics contend. But the PLCs insist on the rigor of their program because it's based on a general-education curriculum, not a credit-recovery curriculum. PLC students take the same state tests as their traditional-school peers. And computer testing on NovaNET and other online curricula prevents social promotion or the intervention of soft-hearted administrators. "We legally graduate kids; I don't do them any favors," said Wes Hamner at Richmond Tech PLC.

In a report on the 2009–10 school year, the project says that, nationally, its students improved their scores in all four core subjects compared to their performance in their home school the year before—by from 6 to 11 percentage points—and that 96 percent of the students classified as seniors at the beginning of the school year graduated. For a project that works with potential dropouts, that's hugely impressive, but there has been little outside research on the PLCs that would confirm that.

The results at the Virginia PLCs are equally ambiguous. In 2009–10, the 432 youngsters who attended the four schools arrived with D averages in math, English, science, and social studies, and, except for math—which was still stuck in the basement—raised them to a C. But the averages include the 30 percent of kids who dropped out, switched to a GED program, or left for some other reason, probably lowering the grades.

The PLCs also reported that 96 percent of their students passed Virginia's end-of-course algebra exams, 97 percent passed reading, 90 percent passed biology, and 100 percent passed writing. That would put the PLCs ahead of state averages in all four subjects. (The results say a lot about Virginia's learning standards: Is it really possible that only 6 percent of the state's 400,000 high schoolers failed reading and 6 percent failed Algebra I last year?) The scores of PLC students are included in the results of their home schools, which makes them difficult to verify. The PLCs also don't accept English-language learners, kids with discipline problems or most disabilities, or those with elementary-level reading and math abilities, as other public schools must, which muddies the comparison.

Still, more than one-third of the youngsters who started at the Virginia PLCs in fall 2009 graduated in 2010, including 68 students who headed to two- or four-year colleges, the Virginia project reported.

When I spoke with Chelsie Saunders in Hampton in early spring, she laid out a career path that included community college, university, and then a career in teaching or nursing. "Honestly, if it wasn't for here, I wouldn't graduate," she told me. When I checked back in June, she had.

June Kronholz is a former Wall Street Journal foreign correspondent, bureau chief, and education reporter, and currently a contributing editor at Education Next.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

At-Risk Students Face E-Learning Challenges

Education Week

By: Katie Ash

August 22, 2011

[http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/08/24/01edtech-atrisk.h31.html?](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/08/24/01edtech-atrisk.h31.html?tkn=POXFv1Gww7oPtei6oWwnjbBoE9xTziNVrmKq&cmp=clp-edweek&intc=EW-EL0811-EWH)

[tkn=POXFv1Gww7oPtei6oWwnjbBoE9xTziNVrmKq&cmp=clp-edweek&intc=EW-EL0811-EWH](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/08/24/01edtech-atrisk.h31.html?tkn=POXFv1Gww7oPtei6oWwnjbBoE9xTziNVrmKq&cmp=clp-edweek&intc=EW-EL0811-EWH)

Stepping into a virtual learning environment can help struggling students interact with curricula in a new way, begin learning with a clean slate, and provide more flexibility to accommodate work or family obligations, say educators and experts working online with students who are at risk of academic failure.

But none of those factors will make such students successful unless they have the support and resources they need to engage with the material and the motivation to work hard for their credits, experts stress.

"The way online learning is set up, it puts the control of the learning on the shoulders of students," said Jeanne Repetto, an associate professor in the department of special education at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. "They feel the confidence and control, which is why online learning can be good for this population."

When students do not take responsibility for their own learning, however, and their virtual teachers cannot maintain steady communication with a support team, such as a school contact or parent, the students are much less likely to be successful, said Michelle Lourcey, the director of credit recovery for the [North Carolina Virtual Public School](#), or NCVPS.

"Our teachers are constantly working with [students] and parents to keep them [on track,] but if there's no motivation and no accountability at the school level," the students may not make it through, she said.

Typically, NCVPS assigns a distance-learning adviser, or someone at the student's home school, to each student to prevent that problem.

"We have found that if we can get the student feeling success in the first unit, they'll stay with us," said Ms. Lourcey.

At-risk students in virtual education are generally grouped into credit-recovery programs that help students who have fallen behind obtain the credits they need to graduate.

NCVPS had 2,200 credit-recovery enrollments out of a total of 17,000 enrollments in the spring of 2011. During the summer, out of 10,000 total enrollments, 3,000 were for credit recovery.

Building strong teacher-student relationships is key to helping struggling students be successful, said Ms. Lourcey.

"With at risk students, if they feel valued, that is very powerful," said Darlene Schaefer, an English teacher at NCVPS. "If they know that there's somebody out there that has their back and believes in them, they believe in success and accomplishment."

Starting Over

For some of those students, being in an online classroom may be the first time they are able to form positive relationships with teachers, said Michelle Barnhill, another teacher at NCVPS.

And once those students trust the teacher, they begin to feel more confident in their learning, said Emily Parrish, a science and math teacher with NCVPS.

"If a student hasn't had success before and begins to feel success, they're going to want more of it," she said.

Having engaging, interactive content is another key to helping struggling students get back on track, said Ms. Lourcey, the credit-recovery director.

"If we're teaching photosynthesis, we want [students] to be able to read about it, but also hear and visually see what it is and then be able to practice the concept immediately," she said. "If [the students] master the content, they get to move on to the next concept. If they haven't mastered it, they go through remediation, where the content is presented in a different way."

Credit-recovery classes are kept small, too, said Ms. Lourcey, at a ratio of one teacher for every 20 students, to ensure teachers have the time and capacity to individualize the curriculum for each student.

Richard Landolt is the principal of [CrossRoads](#), an alternative school that serves about 450 students in grades 6-12 in the 39,000-student Cherokee County school district in Canton, Ga.

CrossRoads began as a school for students who had been expelled from other schools in the district, and while it continues to serve that population, students can attend voluntarily as well. As a result, the school serves students who are on track for graduation, as well as those who may need to undergo credit recovery to graduate on time.

Students at the school choose whether they would like to work through online courses provided by the online-course provider Apex or a traditional textbook-based curriculum.

The students at the school then work individually at their own pace, with facilitation from a teacher.

How a student performs in the first semester is critical to keeping the student engaged, Mr. Landolt said.

"If we can get [students] to [recover] one or two credits within the first 15 weeks, they begin to see they're making progress and getting good grades," he said. "It still comes down to motivation."

'Focus on Education'

Nick Wilson, the communications director of the Columbus, Ohio-based [Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow](#), or ECOT, a public online school serving 10,000 K-12 students in Ohio, said the continuous stream of data possible from online learning can also play a significant role in helping struggling students find success.

"We have a whole team of teachers that are responsible for assessing continuously," Mr. Wilson said. In addition, the learning-management system used by ECOT tracks all of the students' interactions in the courses, "so we can see how that's correlated to their success," he said. "You can't do that in a traditional environment."

[Brady Exploration School](#), in the 84,600-student Jefferson County school system, just west of Denver, serves at-risk students from the district in a hybrid of virtual and face-to-face learning environments.

According to the school's principal, Troy Braley, 65 percent of the student population qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch, 16 percent are homeless, and 75 percent do not read at grade level.

What started as a hands-on, exploratory instructional model has since turned into a hybrid learning environment in order to cut down on the high number of disciplinary problems the school experienced when it opened in 2005, Mr. Braley explained.

"I had the worst discipline in the state," he said. "[The switch to online classes] was not easy for the staff or the community, but the discipline issues stopped, and we could finally focus on education."

Four years later, the school boasts a host of services for struggling students and their families, such as a clinic for free immunizations and checkups for parents and their children, access to bus passes and bicycles, drug-treatment services, and English classes for students and their families.

The school is open from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. to accommodate the schedules of the students, many of whom have part-time jobs or families to take care of, and classes switch instructional methods every 20 minutes to keep students engaged in the material.

"The traditional school just can't meet their needs," Mr. Braley said. Each student is assigned a graduation coach, who looks out for students who otherwise might fall through the cracks.

"If a kid's not doing their homework, [the graduation coach] will call up the parents and say, 'I'll come over, and we'll do it together,'" Mr. Braley said.

Re-engaging Students

To help combat the dropout problem in the 2,750-student Westwood Community School District outside Detroit, administrators opened [Westwood Cyber High School](#), a solely virtual school that serves students in that district. In two years, the school has expanded from 180 students to over 700.

"All of our students are at risk, but a number of them have actually dropped out or are on the verge of dropping out," said Hilliard Hampton, the managing director for the school. Westwood Cyber High is based on a model from the United Kingdom called "not school," said Mr. Hilliard, which has a focus on virtual learning and project-based classes. Students in the school are referred to as "researchers," while teachers are called "mentors."

Students also receive home computers, Internet access, printers, and cameras to complete their virtual courses—equipment they get to keep if they graduate successfully.

"One of the key factors ... for us to understand is that when [students] come into the program, education is not high on their priority list," Mr. Hilliard said. "The first may be to help provide food for their family, or they may have a child themselves.

"Our first challenge is to re-engage the student and raise the level of priority of education," he said.

To do so, the curriculum students undertake is largely based around their own interests.

"We take things that interest them, such as skateboarding or even playing basketball, and apply it to projects," Mr. Hilliard said. "For example, the amount of arc that's required for a student to land a skateboard jump."

By making what students are doing relevant to their own lives, he hopes the students will re-engage with the curriculum and their education.

"These are students who have for some reason or another not been successful in current or prior educational settings," said Sue C. Carnell, the superintendent of the school district. "You have to reinvent their confidence that they can do it."

[\(Back to top\)](#)

ED Offers SIG Schools Extra Time for Teacher Evaluation Systems

Education Week

By: Alyson Klein
August 24, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2011/08/ed_offers_sig_schools_extra_ti.html

The U.S. Department of Education has quietly invited states and schools using the most popular of [four school improvement models](#) to apply for some extra time to figure out the trickiest—and, arguably, the most crucial—component of the federal turnaround strategy: teacher evaluation.

States and schools can apply for a waiver to get more time to come up with teacher evaluation systems that take student progress into account. Those systems are a requirement of the "transformational model," the most widely used and, many argue, the least rigorous of the four School Improvement Grant models.

Schools that got the grants the very first year they were available (the 2010-11 school year) were supposed to devise and start implementing the new systems last year. But many are considering these types of evaluations for the first time, and creating them hasn't been easy.

Now, states can apply for a waiver to give the first round of SIG schools (those that started in the 2010-11 year) more time. Schools can develop the evaluation systems this school year, then pilot them next year. Schools should be ready to use those evaluation systems for hiring, firing, retention, and promotion by the end of the 2013-14 school year.

Schools that start implementing transformation this year (the 2011-12 school year) also have to develop their systems this year, pilot them next year, and have them up and running by the 2013-14 school year.

The department invited states to apply for the waivers in a [letter](#), sent August 12.

The supercharged School Improvement Grant program was one of the Obama's administration's most controversial moves (even if Race to the Top did suck up way more attention). In a nutshell, the program, which got a whopping \$3 billion under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, asked states to pick their lowest-performing schools 5 percent of schools. Schools were asked to implement one of four improvement models, which could include such major steps as removing principals that have been on the job more than three years, getting rid of 50 percent of a school's teachers, or closing the school entirely.

The [most popular](#) model, by far, was the transformational model, which doesn't call for staff removal. Instead, teachers are supposed to be given extensive professional development, the school must get new governing authority, and extend learning time, among other strategies. And transformation schools also must create new teacher evaluation systems that take student performance into account in hiring, firing, promotion, and retention decisions.

That can be a tall order, requiring districts to implement new collective bargaining agreements in some places, sometimes for just one or two schools in a large district.

The SIG grants are supposed to be for three years. But under the timelines outlined in the waiver, schools that started in the very first year would already be done with their grants by the time the new evaluation system is off the ground. That could be problematic for folks trying to figure out if these models do what the department says they do (namely, help fix the very worst schools in the country).

So far, just one state, Utah, has applied for a waiver. The department has encouraged states to get their paperwork in by Aug. 26. But Daren Briscoe, a spokesman for the department, says the agency fully expects that applications will come in after that date.

Briscoe also stressed that these are not blanket waivers. And the letter cautions states not to give any extra time to schools that haven't been making "good-faith effort" to develop the evaluation systems.

Politics K-12 analysis: This is all very technical, but it could be argued that the department is taking an important step when it comes to providing wiggle room on SIG, which many see as a very rigid, our-way-or-the-highway type of program. Lots of folks argued the initial timeline was plain unrealistic. But it also could be argued that the department is seriously (if temporarily) watering down the most widely used of the SIG models. What do you think?

[\(Back to top\)](#)

FLORIDA NEWS

Jeb Bush Plays Education Policy Confidant to Fla.'s Gov. Scott

Education Week

By: Sean Cavanagh

August 24, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2011/08/jeb_bush_the_man_behind_the_man.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+StateEdwatch+%28State+EdWatch%29

Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush has gained a reputation for dishing out [advice on education policy](#) to conservative policymakers around the country, often at their request. Now, newly released e-mails offer insight on the counsel Bush has offered to the

current governor of his own state.

Bush, who served as Florida's governor from 1999 to 2007, recommended that Gov. Rick Scott champion "education savings accounts," a major expansion of the state's current voucher programs, [according](#) to the Associated Press.

The idea is to allow K-12 students to take a large share of the per-pupil allotment they receive for public school and use it for private school tuition instead. While many state voucher programs offer public money for private schools for targeted populations—such as special-needs and disadvantaged students—some have described education savings accounts as "vouchers for all."

In one e-mail, the former governor told fellow Republican Scott that a savings-account-style voucher expansion would likely face legal challenges—as did one Bush-created voucher program, which was struck down by the Florida Supreme Court in 2006.

"I am guessing lawyers inside Tallahassee will say that it is not constitutional," Bush wrote. "I don't know how our court will respond but it will be a game changer for the country and you might have the chance to change the makeup of the court."

The e-mails appear to be written to Scott, who won election last November, as he was preparing to take office in January. The AP reports that the incoming governor forwarded the e-mails and attachments to his transition adviser.

Those trying to connect the dots between Bush and the current governor might note that Scott's transition team [recommended](#) the creation of education savings accounts, before Scott took office. (Bush's former deputy chief of staff for education, Patricia Levesque, was a [member of that team](#), as was Michelle Rhee, among others.) An education savings account proposal failed to muster support in the legislature this year, but it could come back.

Bush also told Scott to consider selling the [Florida Virtual School](#), saying that while it makes money, it could make "more in the private sector." He added: "You could use the proceeds to fund a technology initiative that would lead the nation."

The e-mails also include some colorfully worded and blunt political advice to Scott, such as the suggestion that: "It's OK to veto stupid bills. Trust me, legislators get over it." Bush also advises the new governor to "own" and "dominate" the annual budget, because it's the "path to good policy."

The former governor explained his e-mails by telling AP that he was following a tradition of giving advice to incoming governors.

"If the policy ideas I sent played a role in the conversations and decisions, I am flattered," he said in an e-mail.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Can Technology Solve School Funding?

State Impact

By: John O'Connor

August 23, 2011

<http://stateimpact.npr.org/florida/2011/08/23/can-technology-solve-school-funding/>

Technology could provide low-cost solutions for school districts struggling with tight budgets.

That's what Pinellas County state [Rep. Jeff Brandes](#), a Republican, said at a taping of WUSF's [Florida Matters](#) this week. The show is looking at school issues as students head back to class.

Brandes believes schools can use technology to stretch their budgets. New revenue is unlikely because a tax increase is off the table, he said, and the economy is still slowly recovering from the Great Recession.

Brandes sits on the policy-setting [House education committee](#), and said he favored both virtual charter schools and more widespread use of Apple iPads.

Some Florida districts are already using the \$500 iPads [in place of textbooks](#). Virtual charter schools would allow private and non-profit firms to operate online schools. Students taking virtual classes cost [23 percent less](#) than those in traditional brick and mortar schools, according to one estimate.

Brandes believes the devices will drop in price and become more affordable, and that providers might be willing to provide wireless Internet connections to schools or students.

"We need to be pushing the envelope of innovation," Brandes said.

What do you think are the possibilities? What other technology should schools consider? Does this ignore larger questions about school funding?

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Pasco high schools allow AP classes to grow without class size

restrictions

St. Petersburg Times

By: Jeff Solochek

August 24, 2011

<http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/gradebook/content/pasco-high-schools-allow-ap-classes-grow-without-class-size-restrictions>

The numbers remain in flux as school leaders determine exactly how many students they have.

But Pasco County high schools are letting their Advanced Placement courses grow beyond 25 students this year, as permitted under new rules signed into law by Gov. Rick Scott in the spring.

The law removed hundreds of courses from the list of those considered "core" for purposes of meeting the 2002 class size amendment. Many district officials requested flexibility in implementing the requirements, but several educators have complained that the changes approved could dilute the courses by filling their classrooms too full.

Pasco high school principals have reported that their AP courses are as large as 35 students right now. That could change as counselors adjust schedules. But getting classes down to 25 or fewer won't be the priority, assistant superintendent Tina Tiede said.

"We are treating AP/Dual Enrollment classes as any other non class size class just as we did prior to class size," Tiede said. "That would mean that the seat count would be set up for around 30. There will be some with more than 30 and some with significantly less than 30."

Pasco School Board members have made clear throughout their budgeting workshops and hearings that they want to comply with the letter and spirit of the class size amendment, but that the district might not fully meet the mandate because of funding limitations.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

STATE NEWS

For New York State Teachers' Union, a Victory on Evaluations

New York Times

By: Sharon Otterman

August 24, 2011

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/25/education/25teacher.html?ref=sharonotterman>

A judge ruled Wednesday that the [New York State Board of Regents](#) overreached in its interpretation of a new law on teacher evaluations, offering a victory to the state teachers' union.

The decision, by Justice [Michael C. Lynch](#) of State Supreme Court in Albany, invalidated aspects of a recent Regents vote on teacher evaluations, and may further delay the introduction of the law, which is scheduled to go into effect for all fourth through eighth grade teachers, pending union approval, in the coming school year.

"We are extremely pleased with the outcome," said Richard C. Iannuzzi, the president of the union, the New York State United Teachers.

In June, the union sued the Board of Regents, which sets state education policy, arguing that last-minute changes the Regents approved had increased the role of student test scores in teacher evaluations beyond what the 2010 law permitted.

In his 16-page decision, Justice Lynch largely sided with the union, writing that the Regents had failed to give sufficient weight to the law's collective bargaining requirements, and that it had not fully acknowledged the law's stipulation that test scores alone cannot determine a teacher's performance review. "The Regents is unquestionably invested with broad rule-making authority," Justice Lynch wrote, "but such authority must be exercised subject to and in conformity with the law of the state."

John B. King Jr., the state education commissioner, said the state planned to appeal.

"We are disappointed," he said, by the aspects of the decision "that undermine the rigor of the evaluation system."

Heeding [a call from Dr. King](#) and Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, the Board of Regents voted in May to permit districts to base 40 percent of a teacher's annual review on students' scores on state standardized tests. But the law specifies that 20 percent of the evaluation must be based on state tests, with an additional 20 percent based on other, locally developed student tests. The other 60 percent of the evaluation is based on subjective measures, including observation.

In a compromise that pleased both the union and the state, Justice Lynch ruled that districts could use state tests for both the local and state measure, if the local union chapter approved and the tests were used in more than one way.

But he invalidated [a Regents decision](#) that would have required any teacher who received a rating of "ineffective" on the test score component of his or her evaluation to get an "ineffective" rating over all — no matter how well that teacher scored on

subjective measures.

The new law replaces the simple "satisfactory/unsatisfactory" scale that teachers have been judged against for decades with a four-tiered rating: ineffective, developing, effective or highly effective. [It was passed in a compromise](#) between state education officials and the teachers' union in 2010, to help the state win a \$700 million grant from the federal Race to the Top competition.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Ohio: Charter schools partnering with the Cleveland school district score well on state report card

Cleveland Plain Dealer

By: Patrick O'Donnell/The Plain Dealer

August 24, 2011

http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/08/charter_schools_partnering_wit.html

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The group of charter schools that the [Cleveland school district](#) partners with excelled on this year's state report cards.

Two of the schools that are part of the [Breakthrough group](#) - Citizens Academy and Entrepreneurship Preparatory School - were rated as excellent. Breakthrough's Intergenerational School did even better, landing a rating of excellent with distinction.

Also receiving that top rating of excellent with distinction was the Old Brooklyn Community Middle School, which is part of the [Constellation](#) group and is not affiliated with the Cleveland city schools. Charter schools are publicly funded, but privately operated.

John Zitzner, founder of Entrepreneurship Preparatory, or E Prep, and Village Preparatory, said he was delighted, but not surprised with the ratings. The Breakthrough schools also scored well last year.

He said he was especially pleased that E Prep managed to jump up from effective to excellent because of a change in the "value-added" measure of a student's learning from year to year. He said the state can now compare student performance at E Prep to how those same students did at their previous schools.

Statewide, of the 296 charter schools rated, more than 40 percent were in the bottom two categories of academic watch or academic emergency. About a third were in the middle at continuous improvement and less than 25 percent at effective or above.

Only five charter schools, including the two in Northeast Ohio, made excellent with distinction.

Amy Mobley, principal of the Constellation's Old Brooklyn Community Middle School, said the school of 180 students limits class sizes to 24 and has most of its students entering through its own elementary school, which is rated excellent. Of Constellation's 17 Northeast Ohio schools that were rated, four others were ranked as excellent.

The Cleveland schools have worked closely with Breakthrough, sponsoring its four existing schools -- Citizens Academy, E Prep, Village Prep and Intergenerational School -- and in March agreed to sponsor Breakthrough's addition of three more schools. Village Prep is too new to be rated.

Cleveland schools head Eric Gordon congratulated Breakthrough on its success.

"Part of the reason we're willing to sponsor them is because they get good results," he said.

Zitzner congratulated the district on its own gains, despite a drop in overall ranking.

"We want to change the conversation from charters versus districts," he said. "We want to talk about schools that are high quality against schools that are not high quality."

[\(Back to top\)](#)