

November/December 2006

Commentary: Advancing the College and Work Readiness Agenda after the Midterm Elections

There was plenty of media coverage surrounding the congressional elections last month and their impact on national policy, but less attention has been paid to gubernatorial and other state races and the impact those results will have on state education policy. There is a lot at stake.

Over the past two decades, governors have been pivotal figures in shaping K-12 education policy in this country. Despite the growing influence of the federal government, states are in the driver's seat when it comes to setting and enforcing educational standards, and a growing number of governors have made this a priority. Why? They recognize the strong connection between an education system that achieves high standards and a sound economy that provides good job and growth opportunities for the citizenry. This connection has led many governors to embrace the American Diploma Project (ADP) agenda.

The 2006 midterm election found 36 governors' seats up for grabs. Of those 36 states, 19 are members of the ADP Network and have committed to an ambitious high school reform agenda. In all of these states, there was the potential for not only gubernatorial turnover but also leadership changes in other key positions, such as chief state school officer, state board of education and state legislature. The results of the election could have a significant effect on the direction of education policy in these states.

A Look at the Results

Of the 36 gubernatorial races, the incumbent won in 25 of them. There will be new governors in 11 states. In most of these cases, the incumbent was term limited or retired.

All in all, it was a good election night for

News Clips

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1. **Push for higher standards gains momentum.** Faced with sobering statistics about the percentage of [New Jersey](#) students who earn a college degree and the percentage who need remediation, the state's business and political leaders are joining forces to garner public support for several new initiatives to improve student achievement, including the American Diploma Project (ADP). The state plans to first upgrade its standards to meet ADP benchmarks and then adjust its assessment system. Among the options New Jersey is considering are end-of-course assessments rather than a single test first given in junior year. Already, the state has begun to close a loophole in its testing system by [phasing out](#) a less rigorous alternative for students who failed the state graduation exam.
2. **Massachusetts raises passing score.** Not content with having students achieve the bare minimum to pass the state test, [Massachusetts](#) recently raised the score students need to graduate from "needs improvement" to "proficient." Students who take the test for the first time sophomore year and score below the proficient level will be required to develop an educational proficiency plan, which will lay out the courses they will take in 11th and 12th grades to

governors and others who aggressively committed to their state's college and work readiness agenda. In 13 ADP states, the incumbent governor won (*Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Hawaii, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Texas*). In five states, new governors were elected to replace term-limited or retiring ones (*Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Massachusetts and Ohio*). In *Maryland*, the incumbent governor was defeated. All told, there will be new governors in only six of the 26 ADP states.

Sustaining Reform

As with the federal congressional races, there was a Democratic tide in the races for governor and some state legislatures. Given the broad bipartisan support standards-based reforms have enjoyed across the country, we are optimistic that party change won't knock the college and work readiness agenda off its stride. As chair of the National Governors Association, Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano (D) has launched the [Innovation America](#) initiative, which also should help sustain the momentum given its focus on global competitiveness and innovation in math, science and technology.

This election reminds us that as important as gubernatorial leadership is in education, it is insufficient; governors cannot be successful in isolation. The states that have made the most progress have done so with the sustained commitment of leaders from across the key sectors -- K-12, higher education, business and civic organizations. Especially in states where governors have changed, these leaders will need to step up their level of engagement and ensure continuity. Leadership for reform is a collective responsibility.

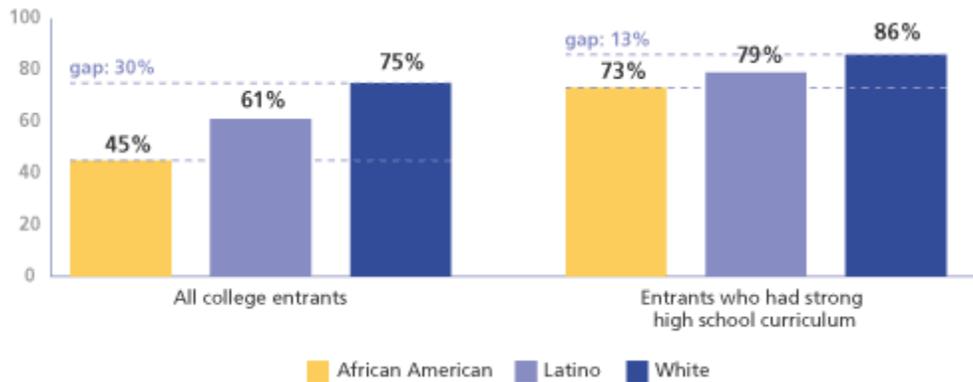
improve their skills.

3. **A closer look at science achievement.** Students in urban school districts trail the national average in science performance, according to a special sampling of the results of the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) (NAEP). Although the study was limited to 10 districts, the findings mirror results from large urban districts as a whole and provide a further signal that U.S. science education needs to be improved to ensure that students are learning the skills they need to maintain the United States' competitive advantage in the global economy. The national NAEP science results, which were released in May, show little progress at 8th and 12th grades and only minimal progress at 4th grade.
4. **No more senioritis.** With most graduation requirements fulfilled and college applications in, many seniors regard second semester as a time to blow off their studies. But with large percentages of students entering college unprepared for credit-bearing classes, some universities have begun to crack down on students whose grades drop dramatically or who do not actually finish the courses they listed on their college applications. In [California](#), universities have revoked admissions for hundreds of students who slacked off, and the **University of Washington** in Seattle is starting to take similar measures.

Did You Know?

Postsecondary Education Pays Off for Students

Average earnings by education, 2004



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2005, 2006*.

Postsecondary education and training is increasingly important in the workforce, and those who have higher education degrees are rewarded. In 2004, adults age 18 and older who had a bachelor's degree earned about \$23,000 more per year than those who had only a high school diploma. Those with an advanced degree earned almost \$50,000 more.

New Resources

- Good information is critical for making the policy and program decisions needed to improve our education system, and states are making progress on putting in place the 10 essential elements of a high-quality longitudinal data system, according to a report by the [Data Quality Campaign](#) (DQC). The report, published on the first anniversary of the launch of the campaign, includes results of DQC's annual survey of state education agencies. Although progress has been made, there is still much work to be done. No state has all 10 essential elements in place, and only nine states have eight or nine of the elements.
- In its new report, the [Thomas B. Fordham Foundation](#) analyzes education reform efforts and their results state by state. Specifically, the report looks at student achievement, particularly for low-income, African American and Hispanic students; achievement trends for these same groups over the past 10 to 15 years; and states' track records in implementing bold education reforms. Overall, the results are bleak, but the analysis does show that the states that have set clear, rigorous standards in the core subjects and hold schools accountable for helping all their students reach those standards are making the most progress, especially in terms of closing the achievement gap.
- Echoing the findings of Achieve's national poll, research conducted by the **Arkansas** Department of Education shows that both [professors](#) and [employers](#) in the state are not satisfied with the preparation students receive in high school. Arkansas leaders are taking significant steps to improve student performance, including raising course requirements to better align them with college and workplace expectations.
- The [National Science Foundation's Urban Systemic Program](#) has worked with large urban districts for 12 years to improve math and science achievement. Now that the program is drawing to a close, a new report, *What Works Best in Science & Mathematics Education Reform*, provides an overview of the challenges and successes of eight districts as they tackled issues such as improving math and science coursework, setting rigorous course requirements and using data to drive education decisions.

by the nation's governors and CEOs to help states raise standards, improve assessments and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work and citizenship. Please feel free to circulate this e-newsletter to your colleagues.

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