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Q&A: Bob Wise
President, Alliance for Excellent Education
ASBJ Editors

For our September 2007 “What is Ready?” cover package, the editors of *ASBJ* interviewed educators, scholars, and researchers about the topic of student readiness for the 21st century.

Bob Wise served as governor of West Virginia from 2001 to 2005. He now is president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, a non-profit organization devoted to secondary education policy.

Editor: What do you think “ready” means for high school graduates?

Wise: Ready is going to be a constantly changing standard, measured by international benchmarks and the marketplace. The student in Boise is no longer going to just be competing against the student in Berkeley, but competing against the student in Bangalore and Beijing. We’re starting to see the convergence of what’s ready for college and what’s ready for the workplace, with the same standards for both. What we’re finding, and research is confirming all the time, that the requirements for success in college are the same requirements for success in workplace. We have much higher levels of literacy than we have seen in years past. There is an increased sophistication and higher levels of math. Then there are the soft skills: the ability to communicate, to work in a team, and the ability to extrapolate and take two thoughts and turn it into an idea. That’s tended to separate the U.S. from other nations, this ability to innovate and create.

Editor: How well do you think schools are preparing students for the 21st century?

Wise: I think schools are running flat out and doing the best they can. The product isn’t what it needs to be. Everyone, whether they are administrators, teachers, superintendents they are all trying very hard. But we’re working on an outdated model. We’re working on a high school model and curriculum that reached its peaks 50 years ago, when the economy needed much less college and high school graduates. I graduated in 1966, and at that point little over 50 percent of people were high school grads and we were king of the heap economically. Fast forward, 80 percent of current and 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs require post-secondary work.

Editor: Is 13 years of public school, using the current 180-day, 6 ½ hour instructional formula, a realistic time limit to ensure readiness? If not, what can schools do differently?

Wise: It depends. There are some schools that are performing off the charts based on the current system. My guess would be they are very affluent districts. But there are other schools and other areas where it’s not working, where students need more time. I wouldn’t have had the courage as a ninth-grader to raise my hand and say I need help in reading. I really believe it’s looking at it case by case, school by school. If can we reorganize the school day, and time to get better results, then it will be time well spent. I want people to be rewarded by the time and effort they put in because they’re spending the time now.

Editor: What needs to happen to better prepare students for the 21st century?

Wise: We have to agree what those skills are. That's why more and more discussion about shared standards, voluntary national standards, looking at a way to benchmark against the international marketplace. Perhaps the tradeoff for that is if state agrees, on a voluntary basis, to a certain set of standards, the federal government would pay for all assessments. We're not talking about a national curriculum but about making sure the best research is available to each school district. This is an area the federal government can be even more involved. To make sure best practices are available to every school district no matter their size.