

What's Good in Public Education

Top 10 things to celebrate about public schools

Patte Barth

This spring marks the 10th anniversary of NSBA's Center for Public Education (CPE). Our charge—then and now—is to present information about education that is timely, evidence-based, and understandable to the general public.

When we began, our audience was mostly interested in topics that had practical implications for local decision-making. Over time, we were asked to examine issues with broad political implications.

One demand has been constant, however: the 80,000-some school board members, educators, parents, and others who comprise the monthly visitors to our website want the real story of public education. In particular, they want the nation to acknowledge the many good things happening in our public schools, even while we recognize the work yet to be done.

To commemorate CPE's first decade, I offer my Top 10 list of what's good in public education. This is an update of an *ASBJ* article I wrote four years ago. I have some new entries this time as well as some returning favorites.

So, let the countdown begin.

10 MODERNIZED CTE

This is a new entry to the list. Today's career-technical

education (CTE) is definitely not your father's vocational education. Reflective of the high-skilled jobs of the new workplace, CTE programs are increasingly integrated with high-level academics alongside hands-on training in growing occupations led by health services, IT, communications, and design. In 2009, nearly nine in 10 high school graduates had earned at least one CTE credit.

What's next: CPE's research into the impact of high school on future outcomes shows that the real power of CTE conveys to students who earn at least three credits in a single occupational concentration plus high-level math and science courses. The widespread adoption of college and career readiness standards should therefore present more opportunities to expand and improve CTE in our schools for all students.

9 DATA SYSTEMS

Ten years ago, only a handful of states had robust education data systems in place capable of providing timely, useful information to help teachers teach, students learn, and schools improve. With a boost of funds from the U.S. Department of Education, every state now has a data system with performance data on elementary and secondary students, and all but one can track data from pre-k through college.

As important, more and more states are helping to build the capacity of districts to use this data effectively. According to the Data Quality Campaign (DQC), over 40 states support training for teachers and principals in data use; create longitudinal statistical reports to guide change; provide access to student-level longitudinal data for teachers, parents and students; and govern access to data by role.

What's next: The increase in data availability and use brings with it an urgency to make sure student and staff privacy is protected. DQC reports that 110 data privacy bills have been introduced this year alone. Watch for the trend to continue.

8 HIGH-QUALITY PRE-KINDERGARTEN

The expansion of state-funded pre-kindergarten was one of the great education stories of the 2000s. The growing body of research showing pre-k's benefits persuaded governors of both parties to invest in the care and education of their youngest citizens. Between 2002 and 2010, the number of 4-year-olds in state-supported programs doubled from 14 percent to 28 percent. At the same time, the quality of these programs increased.

Unfortunately, the recession took its toll on pre-k budgets, which is the main reason its position on my Top 10 list has fallen. Recently, though, dollars have begun to inch up again.

What's next: Expect to see public investments in pre-k to grow until high-quality programs are available to all families who choose to take advantage of them.

7 ELL STUDENTS AND READING

The proportion of English language learners (ELL) in the nation's schools has more than doubled from 4 percent in 1998 to the current 10 percent. And our elementary schools are proving they're up to the task. Over this period of time, reading performance of ELL fourth-graders rose 15 points on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which translates to about one and a half years of additional learning.

Moreover, the gap between ELLs and native English speakers is narrowing. While it's difficult to pinpoint an exact reason for the gains, the introduction of more research-based instructional practices and the expansion of pre-k are likely candidates.

What's next: Although the gap is narrowing, it has not closed. The job is made more difficult in several states that are facing shortages of ELL teachers.

6 COLLEGE-GOING

In 1972, half of recent high school graduates went immediately to a two- or four-year college in the fall. Forty years later, two-thirds of new grads are enrolling in college, and the gap between white and black incoming freshmen is about half what it was.

CPE's studies have revealed that eventually the vast majority of graduates go to college. Eight years out of high school, 88 percent of the class of 2004 had enrolled in college at some point.

What's next: The growth in college-going hasn't corresponded to significant gains in college completion. Ongoing improvement in high school preparation helps (more on that later) but can only go so far. Higher education needs to step up to the plate and do a better job supporting students as they negotiate the demands of postsecondary education.

5 ESEA REAUTHORIZATION

In my earlier Top 10 article, I wrote that passing the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Act "did nothing less than establish education as a civil right." Over the years, presidents of both parties have signed new versions of the bill in order to make sure students in poverty have the same opportunities as their wealthier peers.

This year, President Obama joined his predecessors by signing a reauthorized ESEA, now known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). OK, so Congress got to this seven years late. But the general consensus is that the result made up for the delay. ESSA preserves accountability for the education of poor kids that was the hallmark of the last iteration of ESEA, No Child Left Behind. But it also loosens the federal grip by devolving much of the design and implementation strategies to the states and local districts. The hope is that decisions made by those closest to students and families will have a much better chance to finally close achievement gaps.

What's next: States in consultation with local district leadership will be drafting their new plans over the next

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several months. The next couple of years will tell us how well the new law meets its ambitions.

4 HIGH SCHOOL COURSE-TAKING

High school course-taking makes a return visit to my Top Five things to celebrate. Here's why: In 1990, only half of U.S. high-schoolers had taken algebra II and trigonometry, and students of color were far less likely to be among them. Today, about three-quarters of our students have the benefit of these courses and the gaps have nearly closed. Similar patterns are seen in lab sciences. In addition, average credits earned in all core subjects, including foreign languages and the arts, are up.

What's next: The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights reported that, in 2012, 19 percent of high schools nationally did not offer algebra II and an astonishing 11 percent did not offer algebra I. One in four did not provide chemistry. These courses are the gateway to success for students whether they go to college or directly to the workforce. Policymakers at all levels need to make sure all students have access to them.

3 MATH ACHIEVEMENT

U.S. students are performing higher than ever in math. Fourth- and eighth-graders are performing about two years ahead of their counterparts in 1990 on NAEP. Our 12th-graders increased their scores significantly between 2005 and 2013.

So what about those international rankings? Typically reporters cite the PISA assessment of math literacy—the one test that bedevils our 15-year-olds who rank below the international average. But that's just one part of the story. Our eighth-graders actually rock in math: When comparing each state against other countries, 36 states score above the international average on TIMSS in math while only six scored below it. Our overall national performance at both fourth- and eighth-grade is likewise significantly above the international average.

What's next: Recent changes in math instruction being implemented across the country are intended in part to help students become stronger mathematical thinkers. It's hoped that the next couple of years will show progress in this area.

2 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

High school graduation rates hit historic highs in 2010 and continue to rise. Moreover, the gains are largely due to the achievement of black and Latino students who both improved their rates by a whopping 7 and 12 percentage points, respectively, between 2008 and 2012. I can't think of anything comparable.

The U.S. Department of Education has calculated that 81 percent of the class of 2012 graduated on time. According to CPE's estimates, if late grads were included we could easily be looking at an 85 percent graduation rate, putting the nation on a solid path toward meeting President Obama's goal of 90 percent by 2020.

What's next: Obviously, we want to keep working until we hit 100 percent.

... and finally, my No. 1.

1 PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE STILL THE SCHOOL OF FIRST CHOICE

For all the talk of vouchers, education savings accounts, and homeschooling, close to nine in 10 school-aged children still attend public schools. This figure has remained relatively unchanged for over 40 years.

In addition, the characterization of public schools as "one size fits all" could not be more off base. About 16 percent of students are currently enrolled in a public school of choice, whether a charter, magnet or an inter/intradistrict transfer. And this doesn't include students who participate in special programs within comprehensive schools like the CTE programs referred to earlier, International Baccalaureate, arts specialties and many others. Add it up, and public schools are proving their commitment to serve the needs of all children in their community.

What's next: Our public school educators, administrators, and school board members know their job won't be done until every child who comes through their doors graduates ready for success after high school. And they all know the challenges they continue to face. But let's take this moment to celebrate how much they have accomplished so far and give them the support they need to move forward.

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