

# STATELINE

## Anticipating 2009's "Top 10"

BY KATHY CHRISTIE

Issues directly and indirectly related to the economy will drive 2009 legislative sessions. These 10 challenges will confront state leaders across the nation this year.

### #1. Ensure job opportunities and a workforce with the right skills.

Mikey's mother expects to lose her job; his dad, who is no longer married to his mother, is in the same boat. Grandma and Grandpa can't help because their retirement accounts have plummeted. Mikey's mom and dad need job opportunities, particularly those that offer a living wage and opportunity. For example, advances in nanotechnology will contribute to a new generation of lighter, smaller, and more efficient computers. Companies willing to get in on the ground floor of this new technology will need high-tech facilities, skilled technicians, and project managers. Mikey's mom would benefit from state-initiated public/private partnerships that support such opportunities in her region.

Mikey's mom will need to improve her math skills to be certified as a lab technician. If she lived in Ohio, she could use the Ohio Skills Bank Data Tool to identify critical occupational needs in the state's 12 economic development regions — including data on employment, wages, licensing, projections, plant closings, layoffs, training, and education. She could find out which areas are hiring, what types of positions are in demand, and possible providers of training. Ohio has 92 Career-Technical Planning Districts that include, in part, career centers and joint vocational schools — skill development and career preparation centers that offer a comprehensive mix of vocational and technical training. Such schools could assess Mikey's mom's skills, provide career counseling and planning, provide new skill or trade training, and help her enter or re-enter the job market.

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If Mikey's mom had gone to high school in Virginia, she might have already received a Career Readiness Certificate (CRC). These certificates serve as the framework for aligning curriculum, graduation requirements, and job readiness. The CRC is a portable skills credential that confirms to employers that an individual possesses the basic workplace skills required for 21st-century jobs.

### #2. Reduce the number of dropouts.

States will consider how to implement early warning indicators and will more strongly monitor attendance. They will consider such options as earning graduation credits by demonstrating proficiency. They'll be trying to figure out what measures to use to predict if Mikey is at risk of not completing school.

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### #3. Ensure course quality and learning.

If Mikey were old enough to attend high school, he would join a growing number of students required to pass end-of-course (EOC) exams. These tests assess a student's mastery of certain academic content and skills. In recent years, some states have made EOCs mandatory for all students or are using EOCs instead of minimum-competency exit exams or subject-area tests. A growing number of states this year will join the other 10 states that require passage of these tests in order to graduate high school (Colasanti 2008).

### #4. Seek world-class status.

Most end-of-course tests are aligned to state standards, but there is growing interest in ensuring that state standards stack up against those in the highest-performing countries. Citizens want assurance that our high school graduates are comparable to any graduates in the world.

### #5. Align information-rich systems from P-20.

More states need accessible data on the quality of high school graduates by their success in college, their need to take remedial courses upon enrolling, or their ability to get and hold onto good jobs. To get more sophisticated information, state policy makers will be grappling with how to align and improve K-12, post-secondary, and workforce data systems.

In "Information Won't Be Used If No One Can See It," Dougherty (2008) lists five categories of longitudinal statistics that states might produce:

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1. Student academic performance and growth, disaggregated by students' prior achievement levels;
2. Longitudinal graduation rates, including rates disaggregated by prior achievement;
3. Statistics on the relationship between course completion and exam results;
4. Feedback reports from higher education to K-12 schools and districts; and
5. Feedback reports from high school to middle school and from middle school to elementary school.

P-20 systems don't happen by magic. They take statewide coordination to ensure improved transitions, high school/postsecondary alignment, and collaboration among business, academic, and political

Fiscal difficulties make paying for pre-school more difficult, but the groundswell for ensuring that the youngest students enter schools ready to learn will not ebb.

leaders. Forty states have established P-16 or P-20 councils, and five other states have consolidated most or all governance of public education in one or two agencies or boards who essentially function as P-16 or P-20 councils. Only 16 states have established specific numerical goals for P-16 or P-20 performance indicators (Dounay 2008). This year, more councils are likely to focus on results by limiting their scope and setting measurable goals.

### #6. Increase capacity for assisting schools that need it most.

Mikey and his fellow elementary school students

aren't learning at a level sufficient for success in middle and high school. This year, state leaders will search more deeply for effective, affordable, and sustainable levers for assisting the growing number of needy schools.

### #7. Raise the bar for leadership and teaching.

Assistance is essential, but most policy makers recognize that it's reactive, not proactive. They could address recruiting strong teachers into low-income schools, yet they know that's not enough. Nor is targeting preparation, since millions of teachers already work in schools across the country. This year, more state legislators will begin to trade discrete approaches (e.g., a loan forgiveness policy) for comprehensive approaches that more broadly influence how leaders and teachers become "highly effective" through preparation, certification, professional development, and evaluation.

### #8. Extend time for learning.

Mikey is behind in math and simply must catch up. A growing number of policy makers this year also will be looking for ways to extend learning time. They'll be watching the Massachusetts model, amending it and putting it into practice in their own states. Under the Massachusetts Learning Time Initiative, participating schools modify their schedules to add 300 hours — or about 25% — for all students in the school. The Massachusetts model is based on a balanced approach that includes core academics, enrichment activities, and teacher planning and professional development. The state provides \$1,300 per pupil for implementing schools.

### #9. Ensure quality from P to 3.

Most state leaders will hold their ground on early learning initiatives, even though current fiscal diffi-



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culties make paying for preschool more difficult. The groundswell for ensuring that the youngest students enter schools ready to learn will not ebb. But this year,

State legislators will want efficiencies in school funding and they'll continue to try to figure out how to ensure that additional dollars meant for the low-income students in a particular school are actually dispersed to that school.

policy makers will also want to focus on ensuring a quality K-3 program for the growing numbers of children who come to school better prepared because of high-quality preschool programs.

#### #10. Make dollars go farther.

And finally, state legislators will be counting and stretching every penny — much like Mikey's mom. If they're funding new initiatives, they'll demand that those new initiatives deliver the promised results. They'll seek cost savings from "green" energy and virtual science labs. They'll want efficiencies in school funding and they'll continue to try to figure out how to ensure that additional dollars meant for the low-income students in Mikey's school are actually dis-

persed to that school. Most will do their best to increase salaries, but more legislators will want something in exchange (teaching in a hard-to-staff school, for example, or stronger documented skills in math and science).

The top 10 issues confronting state policy makers are critical to the health of the nation. This will be a year of tough decisions and critical choices. It's a year for partisanship to sit on the bench and let the common good play for the win, all while many states face reduced revenues and a flock of new legislators. Mikey is worth it. **K**

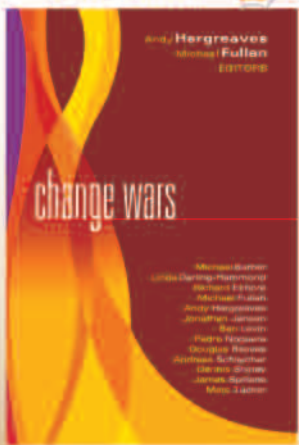
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