

EDUCATION DAILY

The education community's independent daily news service

NCLB reauthorization

Ed Trust calls for college-ready state standards

Group also suggests targeted funds for high-poverty schools

By Patti Mohr

Staff Writer

In contrast to recent groups' requests for Congress to "fix flaws" in the No Child Left Behind Act that demand too much of states and schools, the nonpartisan **Education Trust** organization is calling on lawmakers to strengthen federal requirements.

In a conference call with reporters on Tuesday, **Kati Haycock**, the group's president, said most groups propose changes for the pending NCLB reauthorization that promise to fix problems but are, in fact, "essentially about weakening the law." She said lawmakers should maintain the goal of closing achievement gaps while simultaneously pushing for higher standards, particularly at the high school level.

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"Instead of asking less, Congress should ask more of our schools," Haycock said.

The recommendations come at a time when growing factions of lawmakers turning against NCLB's funding conditions. Rep. **Peter Hoekstra**, R-Mich., now has 58 cosponsors for his "A-Plus Act," which would allow states to use federal funds for their own state-directed reforms.

Flexible timeline for 'college-ready' states

In many cases, Education Trust's 18-page NCLB proposal draws from and builds upon other organizations' suggestions. For example, it offers detailed advice about employing differentiated consequences for schools needing improvement, empowering parents to collectively opt for an expanded learning time over supplemental tutoring, and allowing for growth models accountability systems.

Perhaps the most nuanced recommendation is one aimed at raising state standards to prepare high school students for college and the workforce — a goal widely supported by state
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Urban academic progress still subpar, study finds

By Kris Kitto

Staff Writer

The country's largest urban school districts are making slow progress towards closing the academic achievement gap but are still hovering under national and state averages in core subject areas, according to a new report from the **Council of the Great City Schools**.

The study, called *Beating the Odds*, documents gains in math and reading scores on 2005-06 state assessments from 67 city school systems in 37 states and the District of Columbia. Data are compiled from state systems as well as the Trial Urban District Assessment of the **National Assessment of Educational Progress**.

CGCS Executive Director **Michael Casserly** said the findings demonstrate progress and hope during a critical time for urban school districts.

"We know that urban schools are under more pressure to improve than any other institution, public or private, in the nation," he said.

The study concludes that urban schools made

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Special education services benefit from one extra year

By Kara Arundel

Contributing Writer

Nearly half of students who entered special education in kindergarten no longer received special services by the third grade. However, most students who entered special education just one year later still needed those services in grade three.

These findings, released by the **National Center for Education Statistics** as an issue brief, come from the *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99*. They show how important early intervention is for young struggling students, education experts said.

"The longer you let the child struggle, the bigger the gap is," said **Nancy Rosenfeld**, assistant superintendent of special education services for the **Community Unit School District 95** located outside Chicago. The longer the child struggles, she said, the more that child must play "catch-up" to stay on grade level.

The data analysis did not include the disabilities the children had or if they received special

education services before kindergarten. Future analysis will examine how many third-grade special education students continue to need services in higher grades.

The issue brief included the following findings:

- 12 percent of students received special education services in kindergarten, first or third grades, but most entered special education after first grade.
- 43 percent of special education students received services in third grade, but not in kindergarten or first grade.
- 34 percent began receiving services in kindergarten.
- 23 percent began in first grade.
- Nearly 50 percent of students who received special education in kindergarten had stopped receiving services by third grade.
- 56 percent of students who began special education in first grade continued to need special services in third grade.

For more information visit <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007043>.

RTI methods hold hope for prevention

Schools have traditionally been hesitant to classify young students as needing special education unless they had severe or moderate disabilities. In many cases, teachers had difficulty determining whether a student's weaknesses were the result of youth or true learning disabilities. As a result, struggling students sometimes waited several years before finally getting special education services, putting them ever further behind the learning curve.

However, with new response-to-intervention practices, that's changing, according to **William Brown**, professor of educational studies at the **University of South Carolina**.

The RTI focus on providing preschool supports and identifying connections be-

tween behavior and learning enables schools to intervene early in a child's schooling. Brown said RTI methods in which high-quality instruction and intervention are matched to student needs hold great promise for reducing the number of students needing long-term special education services.

"If done well with targeted intervention for pre-reading skills, listening and social skills ... one would hope that would keep kids out of special education," Brown said.

Further, he said, schools are helped by the 2004 rule that allows states to set aside Individuals with Disabilities Education Act funds for early intervention services.

"In general, sooner is better than later," Brown said.



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AERA conference**Districts, researchers at odds over randomized trials**

NCLB research methodology proves challenging for districts to implement

By Stephen Sawchuk*Staff Writer*

CHICAGO — The randomized control trial, a research methodology underwritten by the No Child Left Behind Act and heavily solicited by the **Education Department's Institute of Educational Sciences**, is proving significantly challenging to implement at the district level, according to researchers at the annual **American Educational Research Association** conference.

Not only do districts resist some of the methodology's formal features, they often do not view the results of RCT studies as compelling evidence upon which to make policy decisions about which textbooks, curricula and interventions to adopt, researchers said.

The findings raise new questions about the overall place of randomized control trials in education, and how stakeholders at all levels can better integrate RCTs into school settings so that they produce information useful both for researchers and districts.

Gold standard?

RCTs randomly assign teachers and their students either to a "treatment" group that uses the intervention being studied — a textbook, curriculum or professional development program, for instance — or a control group that does not. Studies that use the methodology, considered the "gold standard" of education research, can attribute changes in student achievement to specific interventions.

Yet researchers face many roadblocks in getting districts to participate in RCTs and to use the findings for their own decision-making, researchers said.

Some concerns are based on mere logistics.

"The biggest struggle is that it takes a long time," said **Denis Newman**, president of **Empirical Education**, an organization that has received federal funding to help districts carry out small, cost-effective randomized experiments.

Districts generally have to put their plans to adopt an intervention on hold for an entire school year while the study is being conducted. And because adoption decisions are made in the spring for the following school year, researchers have little time to analyze and release study results, Newman noted.

The time period associated with RCTs runs counter to NCLB's school improvement sanctions, which require immediate intervention by school districts, **David Greene** of the **Bay Area Research Group** said.

Moreover, districts resist randomization because of the notion that it violates equitable access by all to the intervention.

"At both the district and the state level, there is a perceived unfairness to those who don't get the treatment," Greene said.

Such concerns complicate efforts to ensure fidelity of RCT implementation on behalf of both the treatment and the control group. In at least one of EE's five-studied RCTs, the treatment group of teachers collaborated with the control group, which compromised study results. In other cases, few teachers agree to participate in the trials. Four of EE's five RCTs had lower teacher turnout than anticipated, resulting in changes to the study designs.

The sociology of RCTs

Researchers also found districts often privilege other types of information in decision-making about interventions over student achievement data from RCTs. According to Greene, because districts traditionally pilot programs that they already plan to adopt, they are much more interested in questions of how a program is implemented, rather than whether it has research-based effectiveness.

What's more, there is evidence that stakeholders at different tiers view RCTs differently. **Cynthia Coburn**, a **University of California, Berkeley** researcher, found in her study of an urban district that top-level administrators had much stronger conceptions of federal research principles than did principals, who were largely skeptical of any type of evidence-based research.

"There is a mixed appetite for evidence generated through evaluations," she said.

While it is still possible to conduct productive RCTs in districts, researchers said more work is needed to help bridge differences between the two groups.

"What are the pathways by which people begin to value research?" Coburn asked. "We can do all the lovely research designs we want and people will not know the difference."

Slow and steady: Urban districts' results in math and reading

Beating the Odds, the new report by the **Council of the Great City Schools**, concluded that urban districts are making important gains in math and reading scores on state assessment tests. Following is a breakdown of the findings.

Math:

- 59 percent of fourth-grade students and 46 percent of eighth-grade students in the examined urban districts scored at or above proficiency on their 2006 state math exams — gains of at least 30 percent in both grades since 2002.
- 67 percent of the districts narrowed the achievement gap between black and white fourth-grade students, and 60 percent narrowed the gap between the same two student groups in

eighth grade.

- 62 percent of the districts narrowed the achievement gap between Latino and white fourth-grade students, and 53 percent narrowed the gap between the same two student groups in eighth grade.

Reading:

- 55 percent of fourth-grade students and 42 percent of eighth-grade students in the districts scored at or above proficiency on their 2006 state reading exams, gains of at least 24 percent in both grades since 2002.
- The majority of urban school districts scored below state averages in fourth- and eighth-grade reading assessments in 2006.

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more progress in math than in reading, although the racial achievement gaps in elementary reading are showing surer signs of narrowing than in elementary math. Casserly said those findings aren't contradictory because reading progress has been more rapid and the achievement gap in reading has probably been wider than in math.

Progress in elementary schools has generally been better than progress in middle schools, the report also found.

New in this year's study is the way researchers calculated the achievement gap. The new calculation compares students of color in a certain district to white students across the state. The previous calculation compared students of color in a certain district to the white students in the same district.

Casserly said the revised calculation gives a "broader, more even-handed look at the gap"

by equalizing some of the socio-economic factors that might have influenced the more narrow calculation.

CGCS highlighted two school districts for their improvement: **Denver Public Schools** and **Memphis (Tenn.) City Schools**.

MCS Superintendent **Carol Johnson** said she credits much of the district's success to a literacy program it implemented with the **University of Memphis**. The 22 percentage-point difference in reading proficiency between black fourth-grade students and their white peers in 2004 narrowed by five percentage points in 2004, an improvement Johnson credited to the literacy initiative.

In Denver, Superintendent **Michael Bennet** said the district's focus on quality teaching and instructional leadership deserve much of the recognition for the 2005-06 reading gains that outpaced the previous four years combined.

TRUST (continued from page 1)

officials, higher education stakeholders, employers, and nonprofit education groups like **Achieve, Inc.**

The proposal would encourage states to align 11th-grade assessments with college- and career-level standards that would be defined by state higher education executive officers and industry representatives.

Though Education Trust estimates that few, if any, states would initially qualify, it would reward such states that do by allowing them to restart the 12-year goal of reaching 100 percent proficiency while lowering the goal to 80 percent of students.

Education Trust also proposes several ways to direct more funds to high-poverty areas:

- A \$100 million per year fund for state longitudinal data systems that include student identifiers, information about programs' student

enrollment, and statewide audits of data, among other things.

- A \$500 million (\$300 million in new money) teacher pay-per-performance grant for state systems.

- A \$750 million state curriculum development fund.

- Amend Title I comparability provisions to require districts to end practices that "short-change high-poverty" schools within five years.

- Reduce Title I funds to states that fail to address funding inequities between high- and low-poverty school districts.

- Reserve 50 percent of Title II teacher quality funds for high-poverty schools and require districts to use the funds for systemic efforts to address staffing issues.

The 18-page recommendations and a summary are available at www2.edtrust.org.

Daily Briefing

Capital Hill Watch

Alexander calls on Smithsonian to expand history museum

Dubbing U.S. history as the “worst subject” of American students, Sen. **Lamar Alexander**, R-Tenn., called on the **Smithsonian Institution** to expand programs for history education when the **Museum of American History** reopens in 2008 after renovation.

He asked museum curators to expand programs that collaborate with and train history teachers to make better education use of real and virtual exhibits, and to work with the **National Parks** system to highlight national historic sites across the nation.

The senator also called for more programs geared toward immigrant students. “In a visit to Nashville Monday, I learned that many students there are legal immigrants who *want* to learn American history so they can pass their citizenship test when they turn 18,” Alexander said. “That’s a group of young minds we should be reaching out to.”

Across the Nation

Florida

Latino groups march for school choice

A group of Latino organizations plans to lead a march to the Capitol Thursday to urge state legislators to boost education so that students are better equipped for college and the workforce.

The **Florida State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce**, the **Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options** and the **National Coalition of Latino Clergy and Christian Leaders** plan to march with local organization **Step Up for Students** to advance their message of greater school choice for Florida students and parents. The group also plans to discuss the lower academic achievement rates among Latino students with state legislators.

According to a statement by FSHCC President **Julio Fuentes**, 50 percent of the state’s Latino students don’t graduate from high school, and 94 percent of Latino students who go on to college drop out.

Upcoming Events

ED to explain new data reporting

The **National Center for Education Statistics** will hold its annual summer meeting on educational research data and reporting in July, focusing on new training in reporting fiscal and Common Core of Data information, which all school districts must send under the No Child Left Behind Act. It will include meetings for state data coordinators and training on how

to use the **Education Department’s** online reporting system.

What: “STATS-DC 2007: Making it Count,” the National Forum on Education Statistics and the National Summer Data Conference.

When: July 23-27, 2007.

Where: **Renaissance Mayflower Hotel**, 1127 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, D.C., 20036

For more information and to register, see <http://ies.ed.gov/whatsnew/conferences>, then click the link for the summer forum.

Bits & Pieces



■ **To Spend or Not to Spend?** During **House** and **Senate** budget debates, Republicans focused the debate on the 2010 expiration of **President Bush’s** tax cuts rather than Democrats’ proposal to increase total discretionary spending by between \$12.5 billion and \$25 billion. That suggests the GOP might not object if Democrats direct more funds to general and special education later this year.

Although Bush asked **Congress** to reduce education funding — from its current \$57.5 billion to the 2006 level of \$56 billion — **Alan Viard**, a scholar with **American Enterprise Institute**, suggested Republicans are simply not “all that enthusiastic about” pushing for “politically unpopular spending cuts.” However, some conservatives like the **Heritage Foundation’s Brian Riedl** are holding out for more federal restraint on school spending: “These programs do not need another large increase, especially when education is primarily a state and local function.”

■ **Wheels on the Bus:** Michigan’s **Bay City Public Schools** had to extend spring break by a day Monday after pranksters deflated one front tire on each of the district’s 88 parked buses over the weekend. Superintendent **Carolyn Weirda** said she wrote off the day because two-thirds of the district’s 9,400 students ride the bus, though she said the district is looking into whether to reschedule the day later. Weirda said the local police are investigating the vandalism, and “Teachers and principals have obviously talked about it with students” returning from their extended “break.”

Health study may find causes of developmental disabilities

By Kara Arundel

Contributing Writer

Researchers hope a massive study of children's health issues could one day lead to the prevention and mitigation of diseases, birth defects, and behavior, learning and mental health problems.

The National Children's Study, led by a variety of federal agencies including **Health and Human Services** and the **Environmental Protection Agency**, will examine physical, environmental and social influences on more than 100,000 children from pre-birth to age 21. Organizers plan to have initial results in 2009-10, and will make updates continuously through the course of the study.

Educators and advocates for children with disabilities say the study has tremendous potential to influence funding and policy for children with special needs. It also may improve approaches to educate students who have special needs and reduce the number of children who require special education services, they say.

"There are environmental factors out there that we don't know of and this will tell us what they are," said **Janna Starr** of the **United Cerebral Palsy** organization. "This is real exciting."

The discoveries may lead to medical interventions that decrease the effects of some disabilities, said Starr, who is the director of disability rights, technology and family policy for **The Arc** and **UCP Disability Policy Collaboration**.

James Wendorf, executive director of the **National Center for Learning Disabilities**, said

the findings would help answer questions that are a mystery, such as whether there are direct links between the environment and learning disabilities.

He said this endeavor will have long-term benefits for advocates for children with disabilities and special educators because the research could shape new policy and lead to targeted solutions for learning disabilities through effective practices.

Congress created the study in the Children's Health Act of 2000 and allocated \$69 million for fiscal year 2007 to create centers where the research will take place. The total cost is \$3 billion. It's the largest study of children's health, in terms of information to be collected, that's ever occurred.

The study will take place in 105 communities nationwide. Teams will work with health care providers and community leaders to recruit and monitor the health of women who are pregnant or who are likely to become pregnant in the near future.

After birth, and periodically during the child's next 21 years, researchers will assess how environmental factors may influence the child's development. They'll also conduct interviews and tests to gauge behavior, learning, and mental health development.

Scientists will examine natural and man-made environmental factors such as water, air and house dust. Researchers will dig deeper into known environmental influences, such as how air pollution exacerbates asthma. They'll also examine less recognized environmental factors that may cause developmental conditions, such as ADHD and autism.

Experts weigh in on proposed NCLB growth models

By Sarah Sparks

Staff Writer

As **Education Department** reviewers continue to cull the next crop of states to test growth models for accountability, more and more policymakers are weighing in on how best to use the tool.

Growth models allow states to calculate student progress by tracking growth in individual students' test scores from year to year, rather than comparing one year's cohort to the next year's class. ED spokesman **Elaine Quesinberry** said peer reviewers continue to investigate the proposed models of nine states — Alaska, Arizona, Hawaii, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Utah — who are vying for the five remaining slots in ED's growth model pilot program. The department expects to name the next round of states by June 1.

Yet debates are already percolating in **Congress** and the education field in general over whether and how to include growth models in the next iteration of NCLB. The limited results back on early rounds of the growth pilot in five approved states have added to the policy muddle.

In an evaluation of the pilot program, researchers at the **National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing** found "almost no change" in the number of schools making adequate yearly progress under growth and regular models in Tennessee and North Carolina. The Center recommended growth models should be given equal weight for accountability in the new law, and should include average growth in a school as well as individual student growth toward that end.

The **Education Trust** also weighed in this week, arguing states should be required to set and achieve three-year growth targets for all students, including those who are already grade-level proficient in math and reading (*see related story, page 1*). It pressed for differentiate test results so that achievement levels could be tracked classroom-by-classroom. The group also called for growth models to be extended into high school by requiring states to test in more than one high school grade.

For more information, see www.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/growthmodel/index.html. The full center report is at www.cse.ucla.edu/products/policy/cresst_policy9_low.pdf.