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Council of the Great City Schools' Executive Director Michael Casserly discusses the release of a two-year study on school testing at a press conference and panel discussion at the National Press Club. The panel featured, left to right, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Council of Chief State School Officers Executive Director Chris Minnich, incoming Acting Secretary of Education John King, North Carolina State School Superintendent June Atkinson and Miami-Dade Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho. (Photo credit: Ron Thomas)

Council Study On School Testing Evokes Nationwide Attention

Up until now, evidence has been sparse to break through the national debate and finger pointing over the extent of school testing in the nation.

But a new study recently released by the Council of the Great City Schools provides hard data of student testing in the nation's largest urban school districts, evoking President Obama's attention, nationwide news coverage and editorials and discussion on "Where do we go from here?"

The average student in America's big-city public schools will take roughly 112 mandatory standardized tests between pre-kindergarten and high school graduation, says the Council's report – *Student Testing in America's Great City Schools: An Inventory and Preliminary Analysis*.

The average of roughly eight standardized tests a year consumes between 20 and 25 hours each school year and frequently produces overlapping results. There were about 401 test titles being used in the nation's largest urban school systems in the 2014-15 school year and students sat over 6,500 times for tests across the 66 school systems studied, the research found.

The two-year study, believed to be the most comprehensive ever undertaken to ascertain the true extent of mandatory testing in the nation's schools, was conducted by the Council at the request of its board

CNN Journalist Addresses Council Conference



Fareed Zakaria

LONG BEACH, Calif.--CNN host Fareed Zakaria grew up in India and when he was age 10, his family purchased a television that for him became a window to America.

He recalled that his version of the American dream was the opening sequence from the television show *Dallas*, with its skyscrapers and men in cowboy hats displaying confidence and a sense of destiny.

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Big-City Schools Hold Steady Amid Nationwide Decline on Federal Test

Students in the nation's large city public schools held steady in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and mathematics on the rigorous federal test known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

In contrast, national scores declined in both fourth- and eighth-grade math as well as eighth-grade reading, while fourth-grade reading remained steady.

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Pittsburgh Board Member Named Urban Educator of the Year

LONG BEACH, Calif.--William "Bill" Isler was elected to the Pittsburgh Board of Education in 1999 and has served on the school board for the past 16 years. Under his leadership, Isler helped the school system regain lost community philanthropic funding and has contributed to efforts in increasing student academic success, which has resulted in higher graduation rates and more students attending postsecondary institutions.

In recognition of his efforts, Isler was recently presented the Green-Garner Award at the Council of the Great City Schools' 59th Annual Fall Conference. The award is presented to the nation's top urban educator for 2015.

Sponsored by the Council of the Great City Schools, Aramark K-12 Education and Voyager Sopris Learning, the top prize is named for Richard R. Green, the first African American chancellor of the New York City school system, and businessman Edward Garner, who had served on the Denver school board.

Upon receiving the Green-Garner Award, Isler gave tribute to his fellow nominees as well as past winners Carol Johnson, former Boston Public Schools superinten-

dent and Arthur Griffin, former Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board member, who have served as mentors. As he concluded his remarks, Isler left the crowd of educators with these words, "Anybody who does anything in this life to help a child is a hero to me. There are many heroes in this room. And to each of you I say thank you."

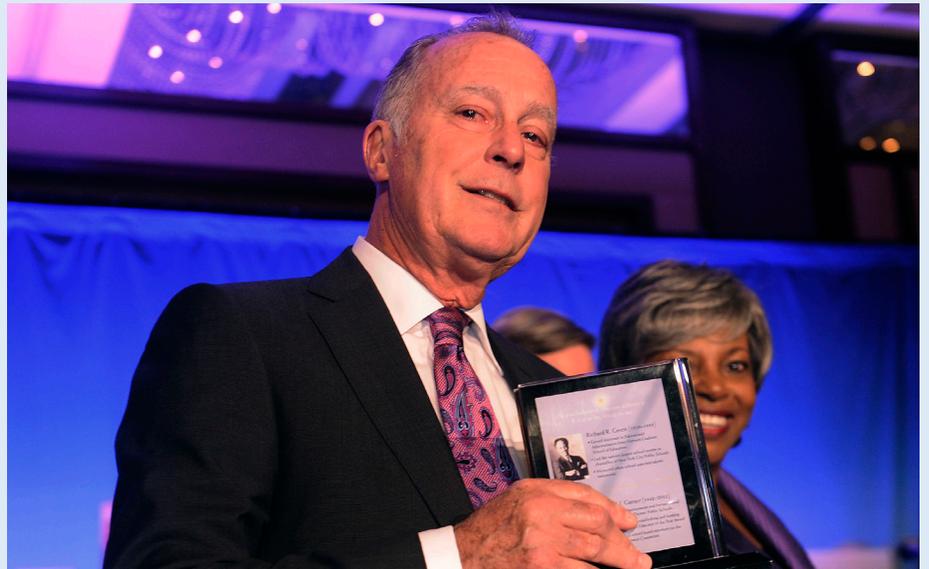
As the recipient of this year's Green-Garner Award, Isler receives a \$10,000 col-

lege scholarship, which he can present to a graduate of his choice in the Pittsburgh school system or from his high school alma mater.

Queen Smith Award

Melissa Collins, a third-grade teacher at John P. Freeman Optional School

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William Isler holds his Green-Garner Award as Voyager's Carolyn Getridge looks on.



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Dallas Keeps Superintendent; Houston, Pittsburgh, Anchorage And Rochester School Chiefs Departing

The Dallas Independent School District in October decided to keep Superintendent Michael Hinojosa at the helm after serving in an interim capacity.

No stranger to Dallas, Hinojosa had led the school district from 2005 to 2011. During his previous tenure, the district graduation rate improved five consecutive years, voters approved a \$1.35 billion bond program, and the district opened several new schools.

“As the board weighed its options, it became clear that the right candidate was right in front of us,” said Board of Trustees President Eric Cowan. “Dr. Hinojosa understands what work is needed to advance Dallas ISD today, and as we look into the future.”

He succeeds Mike Miles, who served as superintendent from 2012 until this past summer.

Stepping Down

In Texas’ largest school district, Houston Independent School District Superintendent Terry Grier has announced that he is stepping down this coming March after a successful six-year tenure that began in 2009.

“I’ve never been one to look backward, but as I consider all that we on Team HISD – our students, parents, teachers, principals, staff and community – accomplished these past six years, I am very humbled and honored to have been part of it,” he said.

The Council of the Great City Schools named Superintendent Grier Urban Educator of the Year in 2014, as he received the Green-Garner Award for outstanding urban school leadership.

In 2013, his school system won the Broad Prize for Urban Education that recognizes an urban school district for making the greatest progress in raising student



Michael Hinojosa

achievement.

Also announcing plans to step down is Pittsburgh Public Schools Superintendent Linda Lane, who has decided not to pursue an extension of her current contract that expires in June 2016.

“By next year, I will have served this district for nearly a decade, the last five years as superintendent and the first four as deputy superintendent,” she said in a press release. “This is a bittersweet decision for me as there is so much about this job that I truly love and will definitely miss.”

Under her leadership, Superintendent Lane has led efforts to increase graduation rates, taken difficult steps to deal with serious fiscal issues, and achieved success in attracting private funding for reform and innovation initiatives.

Also planning to depart is Superintendent Bolgen Vargas of New York’s Rochester City School District, who will resign Dec. 31, according to the Rochester Board of Education.

Daniel Lowengard, former superintendent of the Syracuse City School District, has been named interim superintendent in Rochester. He will succeed Vargas, who will serve as a consultant to the board and the interim chief through June next year.

Vargas took the reins of the Rochester school system as interim superintendent in 2011. He became the permanent leader in 2012. Earlier, he served on the Rochester school board from 1996 to 2003, including board president from 1998-2002.

In Alaska, Anchorage School District Superintendent Ed Graff announced in late October that the school board has chosen not to renew his contract when it ends in 2016.

When he was named superintendent in 2013, Graff’s three-year contract was to end in March next year. The board has agreed to extend his contact through June.

Superintendent Graff plans to stay with the Anchorage school system in a different

capacity after his extended contract is completed, according to the district.



Richard Carranza

Council Chair Inspires Urban Educators At Conference

LONG BEACH, Calif.— Richard Carranza, chair of the Council of the Great City Schools’ Board of Directors, in his own words “kept it real” when he addressed his fellow urban educators at the Council’s 59th Annual Fall Conference.

The son of a sheetmetal worker and hairdresser who only spoke Spanish when he entered kindergarten, Carranza praised America as a land of immigrants and unbounded opportunity that “allows a little Mexican American kid from Tucson, Arizona, to be in Long Beach in front of this august body sharing some thoughts.”

But he also acknowledged that America is a country where black males face violence simply for the color of their skin and he presented a sobering slide show of African Americans such as Trayvon Martin, Eric Gardner and Tamir Rice who were killed by police.

“Make no mistake, the work we are committed to as urban educators in

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of directors, which wanted a full picture of the testing practices in its big-city school systems. The Council's board requested the inventory in 2013 to better inform the public debate and to shape needed reforms.

"The Council's comprehensive review should help all urban school systems examine their testing practices in a way that will lead to considerable improvement," said Felton Williams, the chair-elect of the Council and the school board president in Long Beach, Calif.

"Everyone has some culpability in how much testing there is and how redundant and uncoordinated it is – Congress, the U.S. Department of Education, states, local school systems and even individual schools and teachers," added Michael Casserly, the Council's executive director. "Everyone must play a role in improving this situation."

The Council released the new data on student assessments at a press conference on Oct. 26 at the National Press Club that included a panel discussion featuring U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and incoming Acting Secretary John King among state and local school leaders. The event was aired live nationally on C-SPAN.

"We were not interested here in saying who was right; and who was wrong in the public debate about testing," Casserly stressed. "What we were interested in doing was informing the public conversation with some actual evidence about the extent of testing in our schools and proposing some next steps."

Following the press event, Casserly and the panel participants met with President Obama in the Oval Office at the White House. The president was so concerned about school testing that he issued an open letter to parents and teachers and a Facebook video – along with a testing action plan that outlines principles to help states and school districts improve testing practices.



President Obama, foreground, meets with teachers and representatives of states and school districts who attended the Council press conference. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

Study's Findings

In general, student assessments in public schools are not strategic and often redundant, the study indicated. It found –

- The average amount of time devoted to taking mandated tests during the 2014–15 school year (i.e., tests that were required for every child in a designated grade) was 4.21 days or 2.34 percent of school time for the average 8th grader—the grade with the most mandated testing time.
- The average amount of mandated test time, however, differed by grade and did not include time spent on sample tests, optional tests, and program tests or time to prepare for the tests.
- The time spent on mandatory tests also does not include individual classroom testing or tests designed or acquired at the individual school level.
- Many of the required exams are administered during a two- to three-month period in the second semester and overlap with one another, meaning that testing time feels much longer than the actual percentage, which is spread across the entire school year.

- Students also can spend considerable time taking optional tests, tests associated with a program they are enrolled in, and tests administered to samples of students.

- Students sometimes take end-of-course exams alongside summative tests in the same subjects, contributing to the redundancy in testing of the same students.

- Four out of 10 districts reported having to wait between two and four months before receiving their state test results, meaning the results had limited utility to inform instructional practices.

- The amount of money that school districts spend on testing is considerable but constitutes less than 1 percent of their overall budgets.

- There is no correlation between mandated testing time and reading and math scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

In other words, there's no evidence that adding test time improves academic performance.

"There are many reasons educators have found themselves saddled with the unwieldy, incoherent, at times illogical testing system that we have today and it will take considerable effort to recreate something more intelligent," said Casserly.

Steps Moving Forward

The report notes that over the last several years many of the Council districts have taken steps on their own to reduce the number of tests they administer. For example, some districts are reducing the number of assessments in the early grades, eliminating non-core testing or cutting back on district-mandated testing. Duval County, Fla., in Jacksonville, for example, reduced

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America is a matter of life and death,” said Carranza. “Had Trayvon Martin been in school on the day he was shot, rather than suspended from school he may be alive today.”

Carranza noted that while he is the superintendent of schools in San Francisco, on weekends when he wears his jeans and a t-shirt and walks into certain stores he is followed simply because he happens to be walking in brown skin.

“We have to keep it real,” said Carranza. “We cannot say it’s not about race.” He pointed to statistics in Council mem-

Testing Study *continued from page 4*

the number of K-12 student assessments from 52 in 2014-15 to 22 in 2015-16. Districts also are using parent feedback to guide changes in assessment policy and how they report student progress.

“As America’s urban schools continue to focus on increased academic outcomes for our students, it is important that we have actionable data that can be used to guide instruction and help us focus on reducing learning gaps,” said Superintendent Richard Carranza of the San Francisco school district, who chairs the Council board.

“This self-initiated study of testing in our member school districts is an important tool that will guide how we move forward to improve our local testing environments,” he added.

The Council released preliminary recommendations with the report that call for retaining current annual tests in core subjects but eliminating tests that are either redundant or low quality.

In addition, the Council announced that it will launch a commission of researchers, school leaders, teachers and parents to develop “a more thoughtful approach to assessing the academic needs of our urban schoolchildren.” Casserly indicated that commission chairs would be named soon.

ber districts that revealed that African American students are nine times more likely than white students to be classified as special education students while Latino students are five times more likely.

He also noted that many students are suspended for “willful defiance,” where a teacher can remove a student from a classroom for such nonviolent incidents as not bringing a pencil to class or for what they consider a disrespectful attitude.

“Either we believe the best chance for students is to be in our classroom with caring, knowledgeable adults, or we don’t,” said Carranza. “So why would an adult say to a student get out if they have chosen a career to serve students.”

System Change

A former history teacher, he recalled that in 1779 Thomas Jefferson proposed a two-track educational system for the laboring and the learned.

“The system from the days of Thomas Jefferson is working exceedingly well,” noted Carranza.

He challenged educators to say they are no longer about system improvement but about system change.

“If we believe that a cornerstone of democracy is based on an educated populace and that every student has an inalienable right to a free public education, then why would we say we are about improving a system that has created a perpetual underclass in America,” said Carranza. “We are the change agents; we are the largest school systems in the country. If we don’t do it, who will?”

He celebrated the work urban school districts across the nation are doing around the Council’s Males of Color initiative such as Florida’s Duval County Public Schools which is creating a program to recruit black males into teaching.

“The question urban educators need to ask themselves is ‘Am I doing this to improve the system that Thomas Jefferson talked about, or am I doing this to change the system to serve historically underserved communities?’” said Carranza.

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Memphis high school teacher Melissa Collins accepts the Queen Smith Award.

in Memphis, was the recipient of the Queen Smith Award for Urban Education. The \$5,000 award is named in honor of the late vice president of urban programs for Macmillan/McGraw-Hill Publishing Company.

Urban Impact Award

The Council of the Great City Colleges of Education, an affiliate group of deans working with urban school leaders, presented the Dr. Shirley Schwartz Urban Impact Award to Wichita State University and Wichita Public Schools for their Wichita State University (WSU) Professional Development School Program.

The program is an extension of the Urban Teacher Preparation Project (UTPP) that began in 2007 in seven Wichita elementary schools. Through the UTPP, WSU education students can receive elementary and secondary preparation for urban schools and participate in a teacher residency program for early childhood special education.



Winners receive the Urban Impact Award from Council Chair Richard Carranza, left, and Brooklyn College’s Deborah Shanley, right.

Federal Test *continued from page 1*

The recent release of *The Nation's Report Card: 2015 Mathematics and Reading Trial Urban District Assessment* revealed that average mathematics and reading scores for students in large cities were stable in both grades 4 and 8, following an unbroken 10-year upward trend in urban-student performance on NAEP from 2003 to 2013.

Notably, several individual big-city school districts showed substantial progress on NAEP, including the District of Columbia, Dallas, Miami-Dade County, Cleveland, Chicago, and Boston.

When the NAEP results were released on Oct. 28 in Washington, D.C., the *Miami Herald* published the headline "Miami-Dade students shine on national 'gold standard' test."

Additionally, several cities have now caught up to the national average in at least one grade or subject after significantly trailing the nation in past years.

For example, Boston has now caught up to the national public school average in eighth-grade math and fourth-grade reading after having been significantly behind on the 2003 NAEP assessment. Houston has now caught up to the nation in fourth-grade math. And Miami-Dade County has now moved significantly ahead of the national average in fourth-grade reading.

Three other urban school districts—Austin, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Duval County in Jacksonville, Fla.—also had scores in the fourth and eighth grades that met or exceeded national averages in mathematics and reading.

"The last several years have been marked by significant transitions in academic standards, and schools always risk the possibility that short-term trends will dip as new instructional expectations and methods are put into place," said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools.

"But, for the most part, the large cities defied the national odds, pursuing comprehensive instructional reforms and standards-implementation efforts and showing remarkable stability—and even progress in a number of large urban school systems—

on this rigorous national assessment," he emphasized.

Reading Progress

The nation's big-city public schools have also experienced long-term progress that continues to narrow the achievement gap with the nation in reading. Between 2003 and 2015, large city public schools narrowed this gap in fourth-grade reading from 12 scale score points to eight, a reduction of 33.3 percent. And in eighth-grade reading, large city public schools reduced the gap from 13 points to seven, a decrease of 46.2 percent.

Mathematics Progress

Similarly, between 2003 and 2015, large city public schools narrowed the gap in mathematics achievement in the fourth grade from 10 scale score points to six, a reduction of 40 percent. And in eighth grade, large city public schools reduced the gap from 14 points to eight, a decrease of 42.9 percent.

Black, Hispanic Students

Over the years, large city school systems have shown progress on a number of fronts with their African American and Hispanic students, particularly males of color.

Between 2002 and 2015, fourth-grade reading scores among African American males in the nation's large cities improved 12 scale score points, while scores among African American males nationwide went up eight.

Over the same 2002 to 2015 period, fourth-grade reading scores among Hispanic males improved by 10 scale score points in the nation's large city public schools compared to an increase of eight points nationwide.

Between 2002 and 2015, eighth-grade reading scores among African American males in the nation's large cities increased by six points while scores among African American males nationwide did not change significantly -- up only two points. Moreover, between 2013 and 2015 scores

for African American students in large cities remained flat while nationwide scores dropped significantly by two points.

Participating Districts

Twenty-one big-city school districts volunteered to participate for the 2015 urban NAEP, with Florida's Duval County in Jacksonville participating for the first time. The other districts are Albuquerque, Atlanta, Austin, Baltimore City, Boston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Chicago, Cleveland, Dallas, Detroit, District of Columbia, Fresno, Hillsborough County in Tampa, Houston, Jefferson County in Louisville, Los Angeles, Miami-Dade, New York City, Philadelphia, and San Diego.



(Photo credit: Jon Lemmons/Des Moines Public Schools)

President Obama Visits Des Moines

The academic progress occurring at North High School in Des Moines, Iowa, thrust the campus into the national spotlight recently when President Barack Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan hosted a town hall discussion in the school's auditorium on the topic of college access and affordability. The President emphasized options for college-bound seniors such as applying for eligibility for federal financial aid and reiterated his call for free community colleges nationwide.



Big-city students participate in the Council's town hall meeting on education, race and their futures, featuring, left to right, San Francisco students Hatim Mansori and Mai Sinada, New York City students Cornelius Ray Jr., and Ethan Ambrose, and Long Beach students Carlos Medina, Vandeearlyn Vong and Floyd Johnson.

All-Student Panel Touches Hearts of Urban School Leaders

LONG BEACH, Calif.--Cornelius Ray Jr. is a senior at Gotham Professional Arts Academy in Brooklyn, N.Y., where he receives all As, is a member of the NYC Urban Ambassadors Program to help prepare students for college, and plans to apply to the prestigious Julliard Academy and eventually pursue a career as an actor.

Yet, while riding home on his bicycle, he has been stopped and questioned by the police several times and even thrown against a wall.

One time after Ray was questioned, he asked a police officer, "What do you see when you look at me?" The policeman did not answer him and drove away.

"What scares me the most is the police," said Ray. "I have more fear from them than anybody else."

Ray acknowledged his fear of the police during a riveting and heartfelt 90-minute town hall meeting moderated by National Public Radio journalist Maria Hinojosa in conjunction with the Council of the Great City Schools' 59th Annual Fall Conference here. The town hall featured students from New York City public schools, the San

Francisco Unified School District and the Long Beach Unified School District in an honest discussion focusing on education, race and their futures.

"Is race the central issue you are confronting?" Hinojosa asked the panelists.

"Race is a big issue in America, and people who don't face it are either color-blind or ignorant and we need to have this conversation," said Hatim Mansori, a senior at Mission High School in San Francisco.

Ethan Ambrose, a 12th grader at New York's Medgar Evers College, cited statistics from the New York Department of Education that revealed most of the district's high-performing high schools are attended by white students, even though they make up only 20 percent of the district's student population.

Floyd Johnson, a student in the Long Beach school system, said that the district

offers SAT prep on Saturdays and has stepped up to the challenge of providing resources to all students. Yet at his school, he does feel that more funding is given to sports played by predominantly white students such as water polo and golf.

Vandeearlyn Vong is a Cambodian student in the Long Beach school system and said many people do not realize that Cambodians have some of the highest poverty rates and the lowest education rates in the district.

Mai Sinada, a junior at San Francisco's Raoul Wallenberg High School, said as a Muslim student she feels very supported by the school district. "I play three sports and I keep my hijab on," said Sinada.

However, she acknowledged that even with the district's support of her religion,



Maria Hinojosa consoles San Francisco student Hatim Mansori during the town hall.

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Growing up in India, America represented modernity and the future, so as an immigrant it is puzzling to Zakaria that the country is experiencing anxiety and a sense of foreboding that is showing up not only in politics, but also in education.

"We have convinced ourselves that we are doing terribly and we have to figure out how we can copy those countries that are doing well in education such as South Korea and Singapore," said Zakaria, to nearly 1,000 urban school superintendents, senior administrators, board members and deans of colleges of education assembled here for the Council of the Great City Schools' 59th Annual Fall Conference.

"The key to education now is making sure you provide some kind of trade that people can have right out of high school or college."

He noted that politicians promote this belief, from President Obama dismissing art history and encouraging people to go into technical trades, to governors in the South cutting entire university humanities departments.

"I want to remind us that this is fundamentally un-American," said Zakaria. He recalled that in the 19th century, when Europe was pioneering a trade-based skill model, the United States offered a general education, in which people studied different subjects and then specialized in a field.

But according to the host of CNN's *Fareed Zakaria GPS* international affairs program, Americans are losing confidence in their own product, and one of the reasons is because people are transfixed by scores on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which they believe demonstrate that the United States is falling behind as a country.

Zakaria has looked at past scores of the United States on these tests and found that even in 1963, when the tests first were created, the performance of students in America was almost the same as it is now.

"Yet since 1963, what country has dominated the world of science, technology, innovation, entrepreneurship and economic



Fareed Zakaria delivers global perspective.

growth?" asked Zakaria. "That would be the United States, so somehow the class laggard is doing very well."

While the award-winning journalist is not saying that it is a good idea to do bad on tests, what produces innovation, economic dynamism and creativity is a very complicated question and the idea that one can figure it out from a test may not be the answer.

He believes the human brain is fed in many different ways and while it's important to do science and math, it is also as important to do English, art history and literature.

"The challenge we face right now is how do you recapture the sense of confidence in the educational model that the United States has, but make it better," said Zakaria.

The best-selling author believes that the key in measuring creativity and innovation in schools is not to provide more tests, but to produce more brilliant kids and one way to do that is to put problem solving and independent thinking at the center of the curriculum and teach in a way that excites children's imagination.

"Recognizing how to untap human potential will make us realize that the goal is not to copy some other model," said Zakaria, "but look inside the U.S., which is already the most successful country in the history of the world, and ask what do we do really well and how can we do it better?"

A Sacred Mission

Another conference speaker, George McKenna, became the principal of a low-performing high school in Los Angeles, and under his leadership the school improved so much that McKenna's story was made into an award-winning television movie starring actor Denzel Washington.

"But you have to ask yourself why does a movie need to be made about a school that works?" asked McKenna. "Schools are supposed to work, we should not be surprised when they do. But we should be outraged when they don't."

McKenna, who currently serves as a member of the Los Angeles school board, believes that in urban education people too often accommodate, tolerate and enable the miseducation of some children, particularly children of color and in poverty.

He said that the challenge for big-city school leaders is to make urban schools, which he calls a euphemism for poor and non-white, work effectively, and stressed that Great City Schools conferees

have a special charge in America.

"We are more than gatekeepers," declared McKenna. "We are the determiners of success and failure."

McKenna also touched on the issue of testing, which he believes is very important but that it's different than assessments.

"Testing tells the teacher what they need to do differently for all the kids who did not get an A," said McKenna. "Testing

have a special charge in America.

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George McKenna fires up educators.

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does not determine whether students are smarter than other students.”

A former superintendent, McKenna believes that schools have more of an influence over children than anywhere else, and if children’s homes and neighborhoods are not friendly and warm, schools can’t afford to be chilly.

“We have to embrace them,” said McKenna. “We have to believe a dropout is anathema to our existence and we are not only the determiners, but we are the answer.”

He told urban educators that without compassion for the neediest of children, urban school administrators fail.

The former principal then posed the question to conferees, “What if they were your children?” asked McKenna. “That’s a good test.”

McKenna said public schools are the heart and soul of America, more important than the military, Wall Street, or any political party or candidate, and to be a teacher is the most sacred of all professions.

But he acknowledged that teaching is also a difficult profession, with many challenges including the lack of family support for often the neediest children.

“I know we can educate kids without their parents but not as effectively with their parents,” said McKenna. “But we have to accept that challenge because we cannot allow schools to continue to under educate children based upon their complexion or where they live or the amount of money in their pockets.”

The one advice he tells teachers is that they must have a sense of humor because if they don’t, they are unarmed.

“You have to see the joy in our children,” he said.

McKenna noted that everybody in this country who has done anything in America has come through the k-12 education system because schools are the only place where children must attend by law.

“We are the only place people must come to and we capture their minds and values for 12 plus years,” said McKenna. “How powerful is that. How much more



José Hernandez tells compelling story.

dependent can America be on any other institution?”

Making a Difference

In a speech to urban educators, José Hernandez told them that whenever they feel they are not making a difference, remember his story of how he went from the son of migrant farm workers to a NASA astronaut.

“I want you to remember my story because my story is not unique and there’s a lot of stories like mine within your school districts,” said Hernandez, who in 2009 traveled into space as a crew member of the 128th shuttle mission. “You have a hand in shaping those young minds and giving them the opportunity to reach their maximum potential.”

Hernandez described how he grew up as the youngest of four children in a migrant farming family from Mexico, who traveled to California every year to pick fruits and vegetables. The family would then return to Mexico for the Christmas holidays and start the cycle all over again in the spring.

Even though his dad only finished the third grade, he was adamant about his children getting an education and made sure they attended school, although they went to schools in three different school districts throughout the year.

When it was time to go back to Mexico for the holidays, his father would tell his children to ask their teachers to give them

three months worth of homework which the teachers did.

But when Hernandez made the same request to his second-grade teacher, she decided to visit the family. And with Hernandez translating, the teacher, who had also taught Hernandez’s older brothers and sisters, told his parents that she was concerned about his education because the family moved around so much. His father didn’t share her concern so the teacher then asked his father what would happen if he planted trees and then every four months transplanted those trees somewhere else.

“You are going to stunt their growth because their roots won’t set and the trees won’t bear any fruit,” Hernandez recalled his father saying. And according to Hernandez, as soon as his father said those words the entire demeanor of his face changed because he now understood what the teacher was referring to about how harmful it was for the family to move so much.

That year the family still went back to Mexico for the holidays, but when they came back to California they made the state their home.

“That’s when our education started to get traction,” said Hernandez. “A teacher taking time out of her busy schedule changed the trajectory of a whole family.”

At the age of 10, Hernandez knew he wanted to be astronaut, yet the journey to space was not easy. He was rejected by NASA 11 times but through the experience he learned there are three stages to reaching a goal.

The first stage is to figure out what are the minimum requirements to achieve that goal and attain them. The second stage is to find out what traits successful people have and work toward getting them. For Hernandez, this meant getting his pilot license and becoming certified as a scuba diver. And the third stage is differentiating from the competition and making yourself excel at what you do.

“Perseverance is what you have to do,” urged Hernandez. “You can’t give up on yourself and you have to continually improve yourself and try and try again.”

Major Legislative Challenges Ahead for Remainder Of Congressional Session

By Jeff Simering, *Director of Legislation*

Despite the recent bipartisan agreement in Congress on the federal debt ceiling and the budget, there are major legislative challenges ahead for Washington prior to the end of the calendar year. These end-of-session issues may prove as divisive as those during the past two months.

The election of new leadership in the House of Representatives helped clear the way for the House and Senate to pass a federal debt ceiling extension and snap the standoff over the federal budget. Republicans had been at odds with each other as well as with Democrats and the Obama Administration over these “must-pass” measures.

With President Obama vetoing the defense authorization bill, it was necessary for Congress to reach an agreement on the budget that would increase spending ceilings for not only defense programs but also for domestic programs. As a result, defense and non-defense budget ceilings were increased for FY 2016 and FY 2017 in order to avoid another budget showdown prior to the 2016 elections. Similarly, the federal debt ceiling was extended until early 2017, becoming one of the first items of business for whoever becomes the next president.

Still on the legislative agenda are the annual appropriations bills to keep the federal government in operation beyond the current continuing resolution and a budget reconciliation bill



designed to make additional cuts to federal spending. The budget reconciliation bill, which cannot be filibustered in the Senate, may be used as the vehicle for attempting to repeal parts of the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) and defund Planned Parenthood. Another presidential veto is expected on this bill.

In addition to these year-end controversies are new rules and procedures being considered in both the House and Senate for how each chamber will conduct legislative business and how the majority caucus will select its leaders.

Finally, the annual bill to extend expiring tax breaks is on the agenda, as well as two long-delayed authorization bills--transportation and elementary and secondary education. These bills are not anticipated to evoke the controversies of other year-end legislation.

We expect that the House-Senate Conference Committee to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) will reach an agreement over how to resolve differences between H.R. 5 and S. 1177 by the time this issue of the *Urban Educator* goes to print. An analysis of the conference agreement will be included in our next issue.

Houston CFO Wins Council Award



Ken Huewitt

Ken Huewitt, the chief financial officer and district deputy superintendent for the Houston Independent School District, was recently presented

the Bill Wise Award at the Council of the Great City Schools' Chief Financial Officers Conference in Houston.

Sponsored by Jacobs, a professional services company, the annual award recognizes a school business official who exhibits professionalism, integrity and outstanding service to urban education.

Huewitt, who joined the Houston school system in 2001, oversees all financial operations of the district, as well as day-

to-day operations in the superintendent's absence. In this capacity, he manages the Controller's Office, Budget and Financial Planning, Benefits and Risk Management, Medicaid Finance, Real Estate, Materials Management and Warehousing.

The Bill Wise Award was established in 2000 and is named for an outstanding financial leader from the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools.

Pictorial of 59th Annual Fall Conference



Keynote speaker George McKenna, second from right, poses with the Council leadership, left to right, Chair Richard Carranza, Chair-elect Felton Williams, Council Executive Director Michael Casserly, and Los Angeles Schools Superintendent Ramon Cortines and Orange County (Fla.) Schools Superintendent Barbara Jenkins.



Birmingham Schools Superintendent Kelley Castlin-Gacutan facilitates a conference session.



Austin Schools Superintendent Paul Cruz participates in a session.



Cleveland Schools Superintendent Eric Gordon, left, talks with Fresno Schools Superintendent Michael Hanson.



Kansas City Schools board member Airick West presents information at a conference session.

Photos by Clarence Tabb Jr.



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Town Hall *continued from page 7*

she sometimes feels hatred from other students because she is Muslim and recalled an incident in middle school when a student called her a terrorist.

“Of course it really hurts, but these experiences made me strengthen and build my shield and that’s how I found my voice,” said Sinada.

During a question-and-answer period, the students were asked what they would do to make public education better?

Carlos Medina, a student in the Long Beach school system, advocates that students who are leaders need to take the initiative to improve their schools. “I’ve been in five leadership positions where I have to connect with students,” said Medina. “All it takes is one student leader willing to [reach out] to other students.”

Sinada said she would offer students a day to channel their pain and their fears into artwork and make a gallery that would speak to society and let them know how these students feel.

Johnson is enrolled in a multicultural literature class and he believes students should take these classes at an early age so they learn that racism is an important issue

in America.

The students were also asked what motivates them to succeed.

“What motivates me is all the statistics saying I can’t,” said Ambrose, who wants to be a pediatric neurosurgeon. “Being a young man of color and living in New York City, they say I can’t go to Harvard, but that’s exactly where I’m going to go.”

For Vong, even though her family hasn’t set high standards, they still want her to be successful and that motivates her. “I also want to break the statistics,” she said.

And urban educators were transfixed when Mansori described a harrowing experience that occurred to him in the 6th

grade when he was riding the city bus home from school and was stabbed by a mentally ill homeless man.

His stomach and intestines were punctured and he needed 30 staples to seal the wound. According to Mansori, a doctor told him that he was five minutes away from dying.

“It doesn’t matter what has happened to you, you can come back from a traumatic experience,” declared Mansori. “I pursued sports and my academic career and to better myself as a man so I can succeed.”

The town hall meeting can be viewed in its entirety at: <https://vimeo.com/143278328>.

Teachers Sought for \$25,000 Prize

Applications and nominations are now available for TNTTP’s Fishman Prize for Superlative Classroom Practice. The national award for practicing teachers is the only award exclusively recognizing teachers in high-poverty public schools.

Four winners will receive \$25,000 each and spend a summer meeting with education leaders nationwide, where they reflect

and write about their teaching practices.

The Fishman prize is named after Shira Fishman, a former mechanical engineer who became a trained teacher in District of Columbia Public Schools through TNTTP’s DC Teaching Fellows program.

The application deadline is January 5, 2016. To nominate a teacher for the award, access www.tntp.org/fishmanprize.