

President Obama to Meet With Big-City School Leaders

By Denisa R. Superville on March 16, 2015 9:21 AM

The [rewrite of the No Child Left Behind Act](#), Title 1 portability, early childhood education, college- and career-ready standards, and educating minority males and other urban students are some of the issues that representatives from the nation's largest school districts are expected to discuss in a meeting with President Obama on Monday.

At the heart of the White House meeting, though, will be the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the president's vision of what the latest iteration of the law should entail.

The urban educators, who are superintendents, CEOs, chancellors, and school board members from districts that are part of the Council of the Great City Schools, are also expected to discuss what the administration says are the positive results from its increased investments in K-12, including higher reading and math scores and record-high graduation rates, including among African-American, Hispanic, Native- American, low-income, English-learners and other traditionally underserved groups.

In the past two years, the nation's four-year graduation rate has increased to 81.4 percent, up by 2.4 percent, according to the White House. For African-American, American Indian, Hispanic, low-income and English-language learners, graduation rates increased by 3 percent.

The Department of Education is expected to release additional information on graduation rates on Monday; however, on Sunday, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan spoke about some of those successes during a speech to superintendents and school board members from the Council of the Great City Schools, who are in Washington for the group's annual legislative conference.

According to Duncan, African-American dropouts reduced by 45 percent over the last decade, while Hispanic dropout rates were cut in half from 28 percent to 14 percent during that period.

Higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates have led to 1.1 million additional students of color graduating from high school and enrolling in college between 2008 and 2012, Duncan said.

A great percentage of these students were first-generation college-goers, Duncan said, a trend that has helped transform families and communities and lift generations of traditionally underserved populations out of poverty.

Duncan told the members gathered in The Mayflower Renaissance Hotel—a supportive crowd that he called the "home team"—that the rising graduation rates and corresponding decline in dropouts were due in part to their efforts, along with raising the bar on the national level with a push for higher standards, new assessments, and new teacher and principal evaluation systems.

"This team, this group is leading that effort," Duncan said. "...You could have said 'stop, this is too hard... our kids can't do this' for whatever reason. You hear that, sadly, from other groups. [You] never hear that from here. And if we can continue to accelerate the pace of change, think what that means for our kids, and our families, and our communities, and our cities, and, ultimately, for our nation."

And he urged them to continue those efforts.

"Lots of folks keep saying 'slow down, slow down, stop,' and I want to urge you to continue to work with a real sense of urgency," Duncan said.

During the nearly hour-long session, which included a question-and-answer period, Duncan delved into the ongoing challenges in Congress to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as the No Child Left Behind Act, the topic that is likely going to dominate the discussions today at the White House.

Duncan gave the group a preview of sorts, highlighting the key points and areas that he says an acceptable bill should [emphasize and seek to address](#).

The first, according to Duncan, is **equity**, by including a focus on early childhood education, with more funding for pre-K and a "significant increase" in Title 1 dollars to help level the playing field for disadvantaged students.

Excellence: High expectations that include college-and-career ready-standards for everyone and increased funding to support teachers and principals.

Innovation: The ability to share best practices and scale successful programs, whether they are "Promise Neighborhoods," "Investing in Innovation" (or i3, which provided funds to local school districts to fund and expand programs that are successful in areas such as boosting graduation rates or closing the achievement gap) or other programs that districts have demonstrated are successful in tackling intractable problems.

Duncan said it was still uncertain what the final bill emerging from Congress might look like. A bill that does not have these tenets—equity, excellence, and innovation—is not likely to be signed by the president, he said.

In the best-case scenario, a bi-partisan bill that covers all three areas will pass, and the president will sign it. A second alternative includes one that is not bi-partisan, which the president will veto, he said. Third is that "it falls apart, and we keep going to the waiver."

"That has never been our plan A," he said of the waivers from provisions of NCLB that he has granted to many states. "That would be absolutely less than ideal for us. Folks have said 'don't you want to maintain control? Isn't that good for the Department of Education?' It's not. We want to fix this law—fix it for the nation, for every single child."

But there are clear lines in the sand on what will be acceptable to the administration.

"If [we] end up with bill that takes huge amounts of resources from you guys and move them to the wealthier areas, if we have a bill that doesn't emphasize accountability or has high expectations or support innovation, that would be, for me, a travesty for children around this nation," he said.

The school leaders expected to meet with President Obama on Monday include Superintendent Richard Carranza of San Francisco; Chancellor Kaya Henderson of the District of Columbia school system, Superintendent Valeria Silva of St. Paul public schools in Minnesota, Superintendent Barbara Jenkins of Orange County, Fla; Superintendent Eric Gordon of Cleveland; Darienne Driver of Milwaukee; and Juan Cabrera of El Paso. School board members include Jumoke Hinton Hodge of the Oakland Unified district in California and Airick West of the Kansas City, Mo., school district.

Michael Casserly, the council's executive director, who will also be present, said that in addition to the NCLB rewrite, discussions about the expansion of early-childhood education and Title 1 portability—a Republican proposal that would allow Title 1 funds to follow disadvantaged students to whatever school they choose to attend—the group is expected to speak to the president about other "mutually shared" goals, including the council's work on the President ["My Brother's Keeper"](#) program.

The council, whose members have pledged to take concrete steps to advance educational and career opportunities for boys of color as well as break down barriers that stand in the way of their success, has [been a key partner](#) in the president's initiative.