



PRE-K – 12 EDUCATION Policy Declaration

Introduction

To keep America competitive and strong, the business community must be actively engaged on issues related to our nation's educational system as a means to ensure an educated citizenry of self-sufficient, lifelong learners who have the skills needed to thrive in the global workplace, today and in the future. The coordination of community resources, school support systems, family engagement programs, and classroom teachers' efforts can diminish the barriers to learning. Employer engagement must be significant and have the ability to address some of the greatest challenges facing education in this country. These challenges include the lack of preparation of early learners who enter school for the first time, the significant learning and education gaps among groups of students, as well as the unacceptable number of students who never complete a secondary education or have the skills necessary to enter the world of work or continue on with higher education.

I. Building the Foundation - Early Childhood and Pre-K

Studies by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minnesota reveal that the capacity for developmental skills begins in the first five years of life. This is the beginning point for a person's creativity, communication, team working, problem solving, and critical thinking skills. These studies reflect that there is a great need for children to enter kindergarten prepared to learn. Unfortunately, too few young children today are in fact prepared with these tools. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce believes that to begin to address this issue of maximizing educational effectiveness, while remaining fiscally responsible, there must be far greater coordination among the existing patchwork of federal, state, local, and private early childhood programs. Through these efforts, states and localities should strive to provide access to high quality programs for all children. These programs should include a strong family engagement component to facilitate early literacy development; should focus on academic preparation; and be held accountable for their performance. Research shows that lasting benefits of Pre-K programs only persist when staff is professionally prepared and high quality standards are maintained.

II. Identifying Elements of a Successful K-12 System

The toughest, most important competitive race in the 21st Century worldwide economy will be the global race for talent and workers. For the American Dream to thrive, it will require economic prosperity and opportunity for every American—and that requires a quality, rigorous, well-rounded education that prepares our youth for the challenges of today and tomorrow. To ensure every child receives a quality education, the Chamber believes there needs to be a focus on human talent, effective systems, innovation, and measurement.

A. Human Talent

States and districts must ensure that teachers are effective. Study after study has shown that teacher quality has the biggest impact on student achievement of all school-related factors. Not only does the research show that effective teachers



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do the most to help students learn, it also shows the negative impact of inexperienced and out-of-subject teachers on student performance. With 40% of teachers and principals approaching eligibility for retirement, efforts to raise the bar for educators have taken on added urgency. Dramatic increases in student learning will require better teacher preparation programs, well-designed professional development opportunities, good working conditions, and the creation of nontraditional teaching paths. The business community believes that starting pay for teachers must be improved while avoiding lock-step salary increases. Providing career advancement opportunities and financial rewards are proven methods of motivating employees in every profession, and the same is true of teaching.

States and districts must:

- Align preparation, recruitment, induction, retention, and professional development with the knowledge and skills needed to improve student performance.
- Evaluate schools of education and other organizations that train educators by measuring the impact of their graduates on students' academic achievement.
- Reform pay and performance structures to improve starting salaries; reward teachers whose performance contributes to substantial growth in student achievement; attract and retain effective instructors in subjects experiencing teacher shortages, notably math and science; draw effective educators to high-need schools; and fairly and efficiently remove ineffective educators.

Successful businesses use well-documented management and leadership practices that result in lean, accountable, flexible, high-achieving organizations. Yet these practices are often absent in school management. States and districts are not held accountable for their academic outcomes relative to their expenditures. Nor are principals consistently given the authority to make the decisions for which they are held accountable, from allocating school budgets to hiring new teachers.

States and districts must:

- Hold state education officials and district superintendents accountable for their spending relative to the academic outcomes of students in their districts.
- Increase the authority principals have over budgets and personnel decisions.
- Insist that education leaders implement policies that create greater transparency surrounding spending, staffing, student achievement, and other aspects of school management.



B. Effective Systems

The Chamber believes the existing accountability framework reflected under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act must be strengthened. Specifically, States must have standards and assessments in place to measure student achievement in core academic subjects for all students, and sanctions and rewards for schools based upon their performance towards moving all students toward proficiency.

1. Standards and Rigor

While all States currently have education standards in place at the elementary and secondary levels, too often these standards lack the rigor necessary to ensure that students meeting the standards throughout their school career will have the skills necessary to succeed in postsecondary education or the workplace.

Throughout the States, there should be clear and measurable standards for core academic subjects that are set by the state with input from the business community and institutions of higher education and which reflect what it means to be ready for a postsecondary education and the workplace. These standards and assessments should be benchmarked to the best in the world.

2. Curriculum

To achieve the U.S. Chamber's goal to maintain a competitive business environment in America and to ensure that future generations are fully prepared to compete on a global playing field, students should graduate from high school with a strong grounding in reading and mathematics, advanced problem-solving skills and critical thinking capacities needed to succeed in both postsecondary education and the workplace. An effective academically demanding curriculum should include:

- Expanded learning time.
- Expanding Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs.
- Focusing on science and math education through state and federal funding, improved teacher training and development in these fields and strengthening standards and accountability measures.
- Ensuring that business people cooperate with schools, boards of education, and institutions of higher education to assist them in developing more relevant career and technical education programs.
- Encouraging the use of rigorous, relevant, contextualized, and problem-based learning opportunities.



- Literacy across the curriculum as well as differentiated instruction for struggling older readers in order to accelerate adolescent literacy development and get middle and high school students on track for achievement and academic success.
- Utilizing distance education in such situations as when States and school districts are confronted with issues of reaching students in remote areas; reducing costs of new facilities; and enabling highly qualified educators to “virtually” teach in schools where there are shortages of such teachers.

3. Alignment

For students to graduate high schools with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in postsecondary education and the workplace, there must be alignment among the state standards, curriculum, instruction, professional development, and assessments. In addition, the K-12 system must align its standards with the credit-bearing course requirements of colleges and universities as well as the employer’s skill and knowledge demands to succeed in the workplace.

4. Assessments

While ensuring that States have rigorous standards is important, it is equally important that States accurately measure student achievement in meeting these standards through valid and reliable assessments. These assessments should be provided on an annual basis and be required of all students attending public schools within the State in order to identify students making progress toward proficiency. To help assure consistent and appropriate levels of rigor, States should produce annual benchmark reports that compare state standards and assessment systems to national benchmarks, like the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and to other national and international benchmarks.

5. Rewards and Sanctions

The results of assessments must be used to identify schools that are successfully raising the achievement level of their students. In addition, assessments results must be used to identify those schools in need of improvement. These schools must create and implement real and accountable plans on how they will improve academic achievement. If the plans do not lead to school improvement, these schools must be subject to corrective action.

C. Innovation

The economic environment of the 21st century is rapidly changing. New technologies emerge constantly, bringing with them the demand for new skills, and our education system needs to keep up with the rapid pace of change. The nation needs to experiment more with new approaches to help schools and



students dramatically improve academic performance. Innovation is especially needed when it comes to tackling seemingly intractable problems like the high school dropout crisis, which requires immediate and intensive intervention in the most heavily affected communities. And our openness to new approaches must include efforts to keep students engaged and improve their achievement by expanding learning time.

Education policymakers must:

- Embrace a choice of educational options that will provide greater flexibility to parents and encourage schools to be more responsive to community needs and accountable for academic achievement.
- Implement innovative education models such as contracting with independent organizations to manage and operate schools, early enrollment in college-level courses for credit, youth apprenticeships, charter schools, small learning communities, and online learning. So long as these new institutions and programs are held accountable for academic results, giving them maximum flexibility to try new ideas would most likely yield groundbreaking approaches that, when successful, could be replicated elsewhere.
- Research and develop promising instructional practices and school models aimed at students who are not on track to graduate. A prime target for reform: the large number of high school “dropout factories” across the country that regularly post graduation rates below 50%.
- Encourage schools to expand learning time. Extra learning time provides an opportunity to reinforce the relevance of the subjects students are studying and to keep them engaged and in school. It does not necessarily mean more classroom time, however. Expanded learning time could take forms such as tutoring, differentiated instruction, after-school programs, and experiential learning offered by accountable and highly-effective public and private providers. These enrichment opportunities can be especially important for disadvantaged students.

D. Measuring Success

State and local policymakers must improve data collection and quality dramatically—then use that data to make better educational decisions. In some cases, crucial data are simply unavailable. No state, for example, can provide systematic figures on how many teachers are receiving performance-based rewards—or how many have been terminated for poor performance. In other cases, data are not used in a timely and effective manner. Too often, teachers do not receive the results of student assessments until it is too late to identify student needs and to create and implement individualized improvement plans. Finally, data are not always reliable and consistent. This data is also critical for parents, the public as well as the business community—as a means to hold our education system accountable.



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States must:

- Develop statewide data systems that offer timely and accurate collection, analysis, and use of high-quality longitudinal data to track student achievement and teacher effectiveness. These data systems should include unique and privacy-protected student identifiers to track individual students or teachers across classrooms and schools.
- Adopt the common definition of graduation rate agreed to by the nation's governors.
- Provide funding to districts to train teachers on the use of data to differentiate instruction for students who are not yet proficient and for those who are more advanced.
- Collect, process, and return data to educators and administrators in time for them to use it to benefit their students, schools, and parents.

Conclusion

The Chamber is committed to the success and well-being of every child in America. We believe that our policy proposals will contribute to building an education system deserving of our nation's democratic heritage and capable of enhancing its economic competitiveness.