Innovation for a Positive Change

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The COLLEGIUM

Access | Attainment | Viability
Policy Analysis of Opportunity for Student Success and Economic Viability

Issue 11.1

Innovation for Positive Change

The state of Ohio has started on the right foot in the new year. Education Week’s Quality Counts 2011 report, released on January 11, 2011, passed out grades to each state for performance and policy. Ohio received one of the highest grades in the nation, with an average score of 79.8, or a B-minus. This year, Education Week also chose to conduct a survey to assess the state of public education finances and explore the state-level responses to the recession in areas such as personnel and operational flexibility for districts. The report indicates that, as a result of the economic crisis, a few large-scale education policy changes offered local school systems greater flexibility to meet the economic challenges: ten states allowed for more flexible school days, weeks, and years; twenty-one states loosened stipulations on the use of education aid that was once set aside for specific programs or student populations.

For the third year in a row, Maryland ranked first in overall score with a B-plus, followed by Massachusetts and New York. These states’ 2011 scores were 7.95 to 12.42 percentage points higher than Ohio on the overall measures of quality. On the other end of the spectrum, the District of Columbia, Nebraska, and South Dakota received the lowest grades in the nation with a D-plus. The nation as a whole did not improve upon its grade from last year, remaining at a C. The Obama administration has provided emergency aid to those K-12 institutions in need of funding; however, as U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has stated:

"Literally tens of millions of students will experience budget cuts in one way or another. Moreover, schools, districts and states that are working so hard to improve — will see their reforms undermined by these budget problems. The financial crisis facing public education is coming at an especially crucial moment for America. We are more focused than ever before on the importance of education to our economy and more committed than ever before to challenging ourselves to get better."

Ohio is no exception when it comes to exposure to the perils of the fiscal crisis from a policy standpoint. Many states, including Ohio, have either short-circuited education reforms and proposed cuts to education as they struggle with the fiscal emergency. On a positive note, however, this economic crisis has caused many states and districts to be innovative and creative to cut costs now and down the road. What is important to keep in mind, then, has been best said by Karen Hawley Miles, president and executive director of Education Resource Strategies: “We don’t believe the conversation is about what to cut. The conversation is, ‘What is it that we want to do? What are our most important priorities?’ And then, ‘How do we organize resources to do that in the best way?’”

State and local education leaders know that the budget cuts will probably be hanging around for a while. Even after many sectors of the economy have recovered from a recession, fiscal crises have a long “tail effect” on school budgets. This tail effect is oftentimes due to the reliance on local sources, such as property taxes, to fund school districts: property assessments take longer to reflect changes in market value, affecting the 44 percent of a school budget that comes from local sources. Additionally, the federal funds provided through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and other stimulus aid made up 15 percent to 19 percent of all national education spending (compared to 9 percent in the previous decade). Schools, districts, and states will soon be forced to cope with the loss of this stimulus money or the effects of the “funding cliff,” a phrase coined by Michael Griffith of the Education Commission of the States. Education leaders will be forced to look at school budgets very carefully, re-examine their spending, and cut unnecessary or overlapping jobs or programs. We must keep in mind that the most effective budget cuts, school realignment, or tax increases are not merely Band-Aids to put over cuts that will heal themselves; instead, we must focus on budgetary realignments that reduce costs and keep them down over time.

One of the best ways to thoroughly examine current expenditures is through cooperation among the school administration, teachers, community, and similar communities. For example, the Council of the Great City Schools has created a system that allows districts to compare their spending and operational efficiency against those of other school systems in areas such as transportation, accounting, food services, and custodial work.

Here, Education Week’s ranking (Table 1) is broken down into subcategories, comparing Ohio with the remaining states and the District of Columbia. Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia out-rank Ohio in all five categories; Maine, Massachusetts, and New Jersey do so in four categories. Note: It may seem odd that Ohio is ranked 11th overall when the average rankings for Chance for Success, K-12 Achievement, Transitions and Alignment, and School Finance appear to place Ohio 25th. This higher ranking is because overall scores factor in measurements from the 2010 Quality Counts categories of The Teaching Profession and Standards, Assessments, and Accountability. In these two categories, Ohio ranks 14th and 4th, respectively. Averaging those rankings, then, places Ohio 16th in the nation. Tied grades with other states and some “other” or error terms may also have been factored into the final grade.
Tables such as these are valuable in assessing where Ohio, as a whole, can improve. By looking at states that excel in multiple categories or that have mastered one or two categories, one can obtain valuable models and successful practices that should be further researched for utilization within the state. However, as with any measure of comparison, it is important to remember that our state is unique, and a model that works in Kansas may turn out to be a disaster if implemented in an Ohio school. When schools, colleges, and education-centered entities must decide which programs, activities, and technologies produce the highest yields, it is valuable to do some digging, researching, and number-crunching to pinpoint those models of success.

With a new year and a changing political landscape, we must be held accountable to responsibly, ethically, and creatively get the most “bang for our buck” with the funding that our schools receive.

A new year is often a time for change; now that it seems there is light at the end of the recession tunnel, one major resolution for educators, administrators, teachers, students, researchers, and policymakers alike should be to search for value in every endeavor. Research carried out by the National Consumer Agency has reported that the hard times we are experiencing have caused us to think about where we are spending our money: individuals have become thriftier; they are thinking more carefully about what they buy. We must look at long-term value and smart spending that will positively impact our educational institutions five, ten, and fifty years down the road. For example, the Holmes County College Access Program has been savvy in terms of college access programming by developing a list of nearly forty free or very inexpensive college access programming ideas, such as having students in a media class produce a movie on teachers and their respective colleges and show it on the school announcements or asking teachers to wear their alumni college sweatshirt to school the week before a college fair to initiate discussions about college. These are activities students and teachers can enjoy, while stimulating discussion about college access and success.

Although much of the data available to us focuses on how schools and districts can cut costs, college access or financial aid services can use many of those ideas to make their dollars go farther too. In 2011, it will be important for us to focus on the continuous improvement of the models that we have found successful in college preparation, access, persistence, and success and how we can continue to run these successful programs and activities with restricted funds. Our students have seen the consequences of the recent fiscal crisis; many of them have experienced them firsthand as well. Many of them understand the financial hardship that the nation is under and are willing to help out in any way they can to keep those programs that are most helpful to keep them afloat. The students want and need this support, and as we enter this new decade, we must adjust to the economic, political, organizational, social, and individual changes that are presented to us. As President Obama has stated: “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the ones we seek.”

**Policy Recommendations**

Keeping in mind that Ohio is an extremely diverse state in terms of landscape and population, it is difficult to make overarching policy recommendations for the entire state. Therefore, when deciding how to increase Ohio students’ chances for success (keeping in mind the financial limitations many entities are facing), the best recommendation is to research other successful models, practices, activities, and policies from communities or states that are serving similar populations. Although the models may not be an exact fit to a program, community, or school, this type of searching will spark ideas that will provide a progressive evolution for your organization. Here are some examples of innovative ideas from states that have excelled in the Quality Counts 2011 report. The hope is that the models that work will provide some light bulbs to turn on and cause more educational leaders, policymakers, legislators, and stakeholders to do a bit more
searching to find a program model, activity, or policy that can become a goal to accomplish in the new decade.

**Academic Success in Massachusetts**

Massachusetts has quickly moved up the ladder in student academic achievement in recent years. Between 2000 and 2010, Massachusetts achieved record-high achievement on the statewide tenth grade exam; moved to No. 1 in the country on the ACT; and continued to improve upon student SAT scores, increasing the state’s math score by 16 points. Massachusetts has also focused on closing its achievement gap; by 2010, African-American students made strong gains in all three subjects on the SAT: an 8-point gain in Critical Reading, a 9-point gain in Mathematics, and a 7-point gain in Writing.9 Alongside all of these accomplishments, Massachusetts has also become a world leader in the STEM fields. The state has double the national average of STEM jobs (6 percent of employment versus 3 percent for the nation).10 However, it is not all perfect in Massachusetts: in 2009, students in Massachusetts actually reported interest in studying STEM in college at a rate well below the national average (22 percent versus a national rate of 28 percent).11

To help close this “inspiration gap” in STEM education, Massachusetts has begun to use computer-simulated scientific experiments that enable students to demonstrate that they can think and work like scientists in a laboratory setting.12

Additionally, leaders have recognized that students may be more motivated to study STEM subjects when they are presented in a creative setting. The schools have increased partnerships between businesses, museums, scientific organizations, and universities. For example, the Museum of Science, through its Engineering and the Future program, is making a field-tested hands-on curriculum for high school science and engineering courses available to schools across the country.13 Students and teachers in Massachusetts have benefited from this program thus far, with 334 teachers from 128 districts being trained through the program.14

Institutions of higher education in Massachusetts also have assumed greater involvement in improving students’ chances for success even before they arrive at college. The University of Massachusetts Medical School developed the Worcester Pipeline Collaborative with Worcester Public Schools and other partners. The collaborative provides education, mentoring, and training for students interested in medical careers with immediate openings.15 Tufts University has provided high schools with advanced scientific equipment for in-class experiments and has opened dinner and silent auction, attendees can sign up to sponsor the program. All of the money raised from their Golf4Grads event is used to improve upon student SAT scores, increasing the state’s math score by 16 points per year to better inform stakeholders, including the Ohio General Assembly, of college access, retention and completion issues that impact Ohioans. The content of each issue brief supports the notion that postsecondary degree attainment leads to better, higher-paying jobs for our citizenry, which improves Ohio’s economic viability.

**Mission Statement**

The Ohio College Access Network (OCAN) provides advocacy and support to college access organizations by building partnerships with national, state and local entities that strengthen a network of innovative programs; ultimately, the Network increases postsecondary access and completion.

**Reginald A. Wilkinson, Ed.D.**

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Dr. Wilkinson has influenced the college access community for more than 20 years by serving on the boards of Cleveland Scholarships Program and the Ohio College Access Network (OCAN); Wilkinson is currently the President & CEO of OCAN and a member of the Student Access Access Network and the Lumina Foundation. It was also named the Non-Profit of the Year in 2008 by the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce.17 Many programs and activities On Point for College offers are similar to those offered by college access programs in Ohio. However, On Point for College has developed unique events for students, parents, and schools to be a part of. For example, an anonymous foundation donated money for On Point for College to award 35 students with desktop computers or laptops based on the highest grade point averages for the fall 2010 semester.18 Additionally, On Point for College puts on annual events to raise money for their program. All of the money raised from their Golf4Grads event is used as matching dollars for one of their grants. At an annual fundraising dinner and silent auction, attendees can sign up to sponsor the program. Funds raised at this event go toward items like bedding, bath towels, notebooks, calculators, flash drives, dictionaries, alarm clocks, school clothes, and even transportation to and from school for On Point for College students.19

**Innovate On! Ohio is in an excellent position to put the nation in awe of its increase in quality, innovative programs over the next decade.**

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Advisory Committee for the Midwest Higher Education Compact. He also led the Ohio Business Alliance for Higher Education and the Economy as Executive Director and is a past co-chair of the Student Access and Success Coordinating Council of Ohio. In his capacity as Director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, Wilkinson oversaw the Ohio Central School System for 16 years.

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Ms. White is currently a graduate student at The Ohio State University’s School of Education Policy and Leadership. Influenced by her pre-collegiate rural school experiences and her undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan Ford School of Public Policy, White seeks to obtain a Ph.D. in education policy and continue making influential changes in the education arena. White has served as a research assistant at the Educational Policy Institute, a student adviser at The Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, and is currently The Ohio College Access Network’s Policy & Advocacy Specialist.

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