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Editor's Note

The following is a note from the new assistant deputy secretary for the Office of Innovation and Improvement.

Dear Readers,

I would like to introduce myself. On February 19, 2008, I was appointed as the assistant deputy secretary for the Office of Innovation and Improvement (OII) at the U.S. Department of Education. Prior to coming to OII, I served the Department from February to October 2007, as acting assistant secretary in the Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development (OPEPD). Previously, I was an executive at Edison Schools, where I worked on school turnarounds and charter schools. These experiences, in addition to my background as a professional staff member to the House Education and Workforce Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, as it drafted the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and as the director of the Congressional Education Reform Caucus, afford me a special appreciation of the public school choice and supplemental educational services provisions of NCLB. I also bring a "grassroots" perspective on innovation and improvement, having taught fifth grade at Witt Elementary School in Jefferson County, Colorado, where I helped with the testing of new district standards.

Douglas B. Mesecar

Feature

State Charter Facilities Incentive Grants: Investing in the Future of America's Charter Schools

A hundred years ago, when many of America's children went to school in a one-room schoolhouse, little thought was given to the connection between a school's physical features and the process of learning -- e.g., the impact of light; the most energy-efficient ways to provide power for computers, smart boards, and science labs; or how to integrate materials and space so students have a place to study and reflect. Today, many school buildings are both functional and beautiful and are the pride of their communities.

Yet, unlike traditional public schools that rely on local taxes and bond financing to fund school construction and design, charter schools generally cannot raise funds through these means. Some states have established facilities-aid programs that provide charter schools with structured funding, but, according to [The State of Charter Schools 2000](#), one of the greatest challenges charter schools face is the lack of adequate facilities. As a result, charter schools are often housed in buildings not originally designed for education, and charter school boards and administrators are constantly searching for public and private resources to finance the design or construction of facilities more conducive to student learning and growth.

To help address this growing need across the country, in 2004 the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement (OII) began administering the [State Charter School Facilities Incentive Grants Program](#). For states awarded grants, federal funds are matched with non-federal resources to make payments, on a per-pupil basis, to local charter schools to help finance school facilities. The grants are multi-year in nature with federal support declining yearly as the required percentage of non-federal matching funds increases.

Among the four current grantees of the State Charter School Facilities Incentive Grants Program, the Minnesota Department of Education has placed a special emphasis on planning educational facilities to improve student academic achievement. The [Minnesota Facilities Incentive Grant](#) (MFIG) program provides competitive planning and renovation grants to eligible charter schools based on the following criteria: 1) enhance learning experiences for students based on documented research; 2) contribute to measurable increases in student academic achievement that will help meet the academic goals specified in the schools' charters and make adequate yearly progress in reading and mathematics; 3) model new technologies or other improvements that have the potential to create cost-savings in the operation of the schools' facilities and make efficient use of tax dollars; and 4) model collaborations between the schools and partners in their communities.

During the planning phase of the grant program, grantees are encouraged to utilize such resources as the [National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities](#) (NCEF), a part of the U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program. The clearinghouse offers information and resources on more than 140 school facilities topics, with links to online publications and Web sites and a reference staff available to respond to questions about school facilities planning, design, construction, or maintenance. A specific section of the clearinghouse is devoted to charter schools, containing documents, reports, links, books, and journal articles, many with photographs and floor plans.

Since the MFIG's inception in 2004, 38 state charter schools have received planning grants, which are modest investments of up to \$12,500. To help ensure the success of the program, the Minnesota Department of Education offers workshops to help familiarize applicants with planning and renovation support, as well as other resources, such as [Minnesota's Center for School Change](#), a nationally recognized resource for research and best practices in school innovation and improvement. An example of the Center's resources related to school design is [Smaller, Safer, Saner Successful Schools](#), a compendium of innovative approaches to creating small learning communities for both traditional public and charter schools.

The MFIG also awards renovation grants to enable charter schools to improve their facilities. Charter schools that receive planning grants, and charter schools that independently embark on planning while effectively addressing MFIG's four key goals, are eligible to apply for renovation grants of up to \$500,000, based on student enrollment. The MFIG has awarded 30 renovation grants to charter schools, most of which also received planning grants.

Let the Sunshine and Smart Boards In

[Every Child Has Opportunities](#) (E.C.H.O.), a K-12 school of 170 students in rural Minnesota, occupies a circa 1930 building that once served as the community's local high school. With the help of a \$10,000 MFIG planning grant, a committee that included teachers, support staff, students, and members of the larger school community worked closely with a local architect to prioritize the improvements needed to bring the venerable but outdated school into the 21st century. The \$487,000 implementation grant that the E.C.H.O. team was subsequently awarded focused on improving classroom lighting and updating the instructional technologies available at the school.

In an attempt to reduce heating costs, past administrators bricked over the building's original windows, reducing, or in some classrooms, completely eliminating natural light. The project's architect presented research to the E.C.H.O. facilities committee about the positive effects of natural light on learning and shared the advantages of energy-efficient glass over solid exterior walls. Based on this information, the committee decided to "let the sunshine back in" at E.C.H.O. In addition, computer-based sensors were installed to ensure an optimal balance of natural and artificial light within classrooms. The balance of the two light sources varies throughout the day, as determined by available daylight, weather conditions, and relative proximity to the windows. All of this results in not only energy cost savings, but with the use of motion detectors to turn lights on and off, an added measure of building security.

Another priority for the planning committee at E.C.H.O. was to stimulate student achievement and learning by infusing technology throughout the curriculum. Teachers integrate the information formerly gained from textbooks into Smart boards, which are interactive whiteboards that have increased the pace of lessons and the use of multi-media. In grades 7-12, the renovations accommodated the installation of a "Synergistic Lab," which enables students to work in small group settings around a bank of computer stations. This has

helped expand E.C.H.O.'s use of project-based instruction and student-centered learning.

While students have only recently occupied the newly renovated classrooms, according to E.C.H.O.'s lead teacher, Larry Schueler, the physical and technological innovations the facilities committee researched and implemented are already making a noticeable difference in students' learning experiences. "The interest levels have increased greatly," said Schueler, and plans are to look very carefully at test scores and other achievement measures as early as this spring.

From Nuts and Bolts to a Learning Directed Community



Individual areas or "cave spaces" available throughout the school

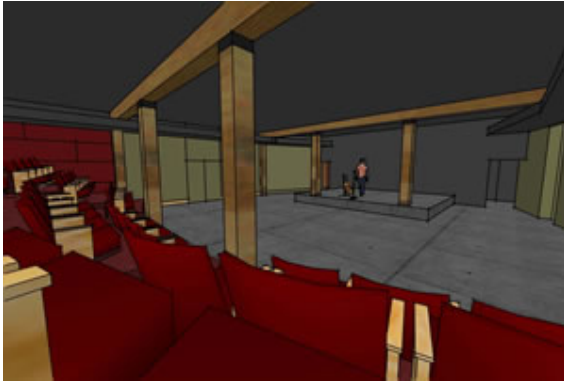
In 2002, a former 19th century plumbing-supply warehouse became the new home of Duluth, Minnesota's [Harbor City International School](#). A small group of dedicated teachers worked closely with educational facility planners and architects to find an urban building with the potential to meet their educational philosophy: to provide a high degree of attention to the individual needs of high school students, combined with opportunities to exhibit their knowledge and achievements. Starting on the building's third floor and with about 14,000 square feet of space, the Harbor City team fashioned a combination of innovative learning environments: intimate "cave" spaces; variable-sized rooms that lend themselves to explorations in academic subjects; get away spaces or niches; presentation space; spaces with access to food and beverage; and distinctive places to capture the project-based learning that is at core of the school's instructional approach. As expressed by Harbor City students on the

school's Web site, it "serves as a compass for an individual's learning...a learning community that provides direction to its students while allowing the individual to create his or her own map of knowledge."

The available space for creating those individual learning maps expanded two years after the school's opening with the addition of the fourth floor, enabling enrollment to double to its current size of 200 students. The innovative nature of the school's design was nationally recognized in 2002 when Harbor City received a [DesignShare Award](#) for its "function-follows-form" adaptation of the former warehouse. The award has been given since 2000 for the best school design, and 2007 winners are featured on this month's [Edutopia.org](#) Web site.

The Harbor City team's next expansion was informed by research on the role of the arts in academic achievement. According to the school's director, Chris Hazleton, studies reported in [Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts On Learning](#) (1999) prompted their interest in expanding the school's use of and space for student presentations. "We wanted to raise the bar," according to the director, but not only by providing students with an expanded presentation stage, but one that could flexibly accommodate interdisciplinary explorations in language arts and social studies as well as full-scale theatrical productions.

The faculty joined with students and community stakeholders to discuss the idea of a new performing and presentation facility, took field trips to other schools with similar facilities, and engaged architects that were in sync with the design philosophy of the existing school. Then, in 2007, the Harbor City team competed for and consequently won a \$500,000 MFIG implementation grant. The new theater space will occupy the second floor of the building, which has a slightly higher ceiling, lending itself to theatrical staging and lighting. And, to celebrate the opening, a production of Molière's *Tartuffe* will dedicate the stage on May 8, to which the faculty and students plan to add a weekend roster of other performances by and for the local community.



A Charter School Facilities Incentive Grant helped Harbor City International School build a new theater space.

The new space will not only bolster Harbor City's theater education resources, but will provide the students and faculty with a new project-based learning tool and open opportunities for greater community collaboration. Beginning next school year, students will form technical production and administrative teams that—under the guidance of faculty members—will reach out to local arts and cultural groups, including local theaters, music ensembles, and film series promoters, offering rental of the space accompanied by the students' services in marketing, and presenting the performances and other events. Students who staff the Harbor City radio station also have plans to air live and recorded music performances from the new facility.

In the 21st century, the charter school movement is already fueling a revolution in teaching and learning. With help from the State Charter School Facilities Incentive Grants Program, Minnesota is showing that charters can also lead the way on innovative school design—creating facilities that don't just contain but actually encourage and improve learning.

Key Resources

- [OII Charter School Facilities Resources](#)
- [OII General School Facility Resources](#)
- NCES: [Public School Principals Report on Their School Facilities: Fall 2005](#)
- [Minnesota Department of Education Charter School Resources](#)
- [Report from the National Summit on School Design](#)

What's New ?

From the U.S. Department of Education

To honor the 10th anniversary of Teach for America week, U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings [joined](#) First Lady Laura Bush to teach a first grade science class. "Teach For America is on the leading edge of a movement that's transforming our country's schools by rejecting ineffective habits and embracing creativity," said Secretary Spellings. (April 14)



Secretary Spellings and First Lady Laura Bush teach a first grade science class at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in Washington D.C. They visited the school and taught the class together to honor the tenth anniversary of Teach For America Week.

To spotlight the President's challenge on community service and volunteerism, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings [presented](#) President George W. Bush's Voluntary Service Awards to Whitney Powell, Jacqueline Armstrong, and Vernita Jefferson, a student, parent, and teacher respectively, at Banneker High School in Washington, D.C. Also participating at the event were the NFL's Chris Draft of the St. Louis Rams, Warrick Dunn of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, and District of Columbia Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee. Draft and Dunn were two of twelve current players being honored by the NFL for their off-the-field volunteerism and service to the community. The Secretary also announced the release of a new publication, [Partnerships in Character Education State Pilot Projects, 1995-2001- Lessons Learned](#), about integrating character education into schools. (April 4)

Secretary Spellings [highlighted](#) the results of *The Nation's Report Card™: Writing 2007*, and commended educators and students for the significant progress made under *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). The Secretary noted that average writing scores for both eighth and twelfth graders were higher in 2007 than in previous assessments from 2002 and 1998. (April 3)

Secretary Spellings [announced](#) she would take steps to ensure all states use the same formula to calculate how many students graduate from high school on time, and how many drop out. The Department will also require that data be made public so that people nationwide can compare how students of every race, background, and income level are performing. The Secretary made her remarks on the need for a more comprehensive and precise definition of "graduation rate" at a press conference hosted by America's Promise Alliance and State Farm Insurance Company on the Alliance's dropout prevention campaign. (April 1)

The April edition of *Education News Parents Can Use* explored questions about how *No Child Left Behind* – through such initiatives as Early Reading First – supports the teaching of young children. The show also showcased other initiatives including "Good Start, Grow Smart" and Head Start, which are designed to improve early childhood education and ensure children are ready to learn when they enter school. Research proves that what children learn before coming to school is vital to their long-term success. To find out more about the TV show, visit the [Education News Parents Can Use](#) Web site. The archived webcast of the show may be viewed online at <http://www.connectlive.com/events/ednews>. (April 15)



From the Office of Innovation and Improvement

Secretary Spellings [announced](#) the award of \$114.7 million in grants to improve the quality of American history education. The grants are being awarded to school districts in 40 states nationwide. The [Teaching American History grant program](#) is designed to improve student achievement by enhancing teachers' knowledge of traditional American history through intensive ongoing professional development in both content and research-based teaching strategies. (April 2)

The Department of Education recently [released](#) an interim report on the state and local implementation of school choice and supplemental education services. The report, entitled *No Child Left Behind Act, Volume IV - Title I School Choice and Supplemental Education Services: Interim Report*, found that the number of students participating in both options, especially supplemental educational services, has increased substantially. However, only a small proportion of eligible students took advantage of the options available to them. (April 3)

Charter Schools

A new longitudinal research study will measure the effectiveness of nonprofit charter school management organizations (CMOs). The study, recently [launched](#) by NewSchools Venture Fund and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, will be led by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., and the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington. CMOs are nonprofit organizations that operate and replicate clusters of like-minded charter schools; among the better known are the Green Dot Public Schools and Achievement First. The study will cover almost 200 schools within 33 CMOs in 12 states. (March 2008)

Education Reform

The [Center for Benefit-Cost Studies of Education](#) at Teachers College, Columbia University, sets out to calculate and compare the long- and short-term costs – and probable payoffs – of various educational strategies that aim to improve students' academic achievement and lives. The center plans to study the fiscal advantages and disadvantages of the Advanced Placement program. (April 2008)

Florida's Miami-Dade and Broward County schools will compete with Long Beach, Calif., and Texas' Aldine and Brownsville school systems for the prestigious [Broad Prize for Urban Education](#). The top winner will be announced on Oct. 14, 2008 and awarded \$500,000 in scholarships for graduating seniors. The four runners-up each will receive \$125,000 in scholarships. (April 2008)

Funding

The District of Columbia school system pays more than \$13,000 per student, according to figures from the [Census Bureau](#). On average, in 2006, districts nationwide spent \$9,138 per student, which is about \$437 more than the previous year. The District of Columbia ranked third highest in the country for per-student spending, surpassed only by New York, at \$14,884, and New Jersey, at \$14,630. Per-student spending was the lowest in Utah, at \$5,437; Idaho, at \$6,440; and Arizona, at \$6,472. (April 1)

Leadership

[The Mind Trust](#) is now accepting applications for the second cohort of its Education Entrepreneur Fellowship. The fellowship offers promising education entrepreneurs the opportunity to develop and launch their "break-the-mold" education ventures. Fellows receive a full-time annual salary of \$90,000 for two years, benefits, and customized training. Statements of intent are due by Sept. 5, 2008. Fellowships will be awarded by Dec. 1, 2008. (April 2008)

The [Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development](#) (ASCD) highlights the accomplishments of young educators who achieve excellence and equity in teaching and learning through the [ASCD Outstanding Young Educator Award](#). Deirdra Grode, a 7th- and 8th-grade social studies and language arts teacher at Hoboken Charter School in Hoboken, N.J., is the winner of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's (ASCD) 2008 Outstanding Young Educator Award (OYEA). ASCD honored Grode on March 15, 2008 at its Annual Conference and Exhibit Show in New Orleans, La. Candidates for the OYEA are education professionals, 40 years of age or younger, who demonstrate exemplary commitment and exceptional contribution to the profession. The deadline for nominations is Aug. 1, 2008. (April 2008)

A nationwide [survey](#) of girls and boys commissioned by the [Girl Scouts of the USA](#) reveals that promoting leadership in girls is primarily a matter of fostering their self-confidence and providing supportive environments. Called *Change It Up*, the survey shows that girls, even at a very young age, have definite ideas about what it means to be a leader, and that the traditional command-and-control model of leadership does not resonate with their desire to make a difference in the world. (March 2008)

Mathematics and Science

More time in school can boost economic growth – but only if students' cognitive skills, as measured by mathematics and science tests, are improved as a result, a new study published in the spring edition of [Education Next](#) asserts. The study also concludes that if the U.S. performed on par with the world's leaders in mathematics and science, it would add about two-thirds of a percentage point to the gross domestic product. (Spring 2008)

Raising Student Achievement

Two of the nation's oldest philanthropic foundations, the [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#) and the [Foundation for Child Development](#) have come together to create a "Strategic Knowledge Fund" to understand and improve the lives of children from birth to age eight who are at-risk for poor educational outcomes. (April 1)

On average, just over 51 percent of students in the 50 largest U.S. cities graduate from public high school, according to a new [report](#) from America's Promise Alliance. Suburban and rural public high school students were more likely to graduate than their urban peers, according to the report. It also revealed that 70 percent of all American students graduate on time. (April 1)

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education's [report](#) *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates by State and Race/Ethnicity, 1992-2022*, finds that over much of the next decade, Maryland and Virginia will have fewer public high school graduates; however, more of them will come from minority communities. Nationally, 17 states will experience changes in the number of high school graduates, from a loss of five percent to an increase of five percent, from 2005-2006 through 2021-2022. (March 20)

A [report](#) from the [Wallace Foundation](#) describes a coordinated approach that aims to achieve widespread, sustained improvements in the quality and reach of out-of-school-time, or after-school programs so that more children may benefit. (February 2008)

An [analysis](#) of existing research from Cisco Systems shows that multimodal learning, or using many "modes" or strategies that cater to individual learners' needs, is more effective than traditional learning that uses a single strategy. (2008)

Teacher Quality and Development

Education Week's online portal, Edweek.org, has launched an education career center for teachers and administrators called [TopSchoolJobs.org](#). Users can find [job listings](#), certification and salary [information](#), and advice from [blogs](#). The [Career Coach](#) e-newsletter offers additional resources for job seekers. (April 2008)

Educators who are part of the [Teach For America](#) (TFA) program may have an edge over traditional educators in terms of high-school mathematics and science instruction, as measured by students' final-exam scores, according to a new Urban Institute [report](#). Jane Hannaway, a co-author of the report, believes the program's selectivity may play a role. Only 21 percent of TFA applicants were accepted into the program in 2007. (March 27)

Technology

[Technology Counts](#), a joint project of [Education Week](#) and the [Editorial Projects in Education Research Center](#), is now available. Some highlights of this year's publication include individual [state reports](#), state [data comparisons](#), an interactive map of [Technology Grades](#) by state, and feature stories regarding science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), among other topics. (April 2008)

In honor of its 10th anniversary, [eSchool News](#) has put together a [list](#) of 10 people who have had a profound impact on educational technology in the last decade. Some of the honorees include Bill Gates, chairman of Microsoft Corporation; Julie Evans, CEO of Project Tomorrow; and Angus King, former governor of Maine. (April 2008)

A new teacher-created Web site, [Google Earth Lessons](#), allows educators to share lesson plans that incorporate the [Google Earth](#) software application. The user-friendly site, which is structured much like a blog with postings and opinions about various applications organized by date, also offers guides to help teachers become more comfortable with the software. (April 2008)

[TeacherTube](#), created by Jason Smith, a 14-year veteran educator, makes it easier for teachers to share educational videos for classroom use. Another useful site, [SchoolTube](#), primarily features videos that students produce for class. (April 2008)

Innovations in the News

Charter Schools

Nearly 20,000 employees of the California Department of Education, including teachers, could be laid off this summer. As a result, a recent charter school job fair drew a great deal of interest. "The sudden availability of teachers is a potential boon for charter school administrators," explained one of them. Administrators said charter schools offer teachers more job security because, rather than worrying about their hire date, they can focus on only their performance, which is the criterion for keeping their jobs. [More— [Los Angeles Times](#)] (March 16)

Thousands of families lined up recently to enter the charter school lottery held in New York City for spots in the city's nearly 80 public charter schools. Even though traditional public schools have made progress, the charters are drawing attention for their success. The charter schools stress strict accountability for their principals, teachers, and students, and if school personnel fail to perform they are fired. Since New York's first charter opened in 1999, these schools have shown better results across the board. [More— [New York Post](#)] (April 4)

In Washington, D.C., for the seventh year in a row, public schools have lost students, while charter school enrollments have increased. A total of 49,400 students are now enrolled in D.C.'s traditional public schools versus more than 55,000 last year. Separately, charter school enrollment in the District topped 20,000 for the first time. [More—[Education Week](#)] (April 3) (*paid subscription required*)

IDEA Academy and College Preparatory Mission in Mission, Texas, a charter school that is scheduled to open in fall 2008, plans to implement a layered staffing and support system for teachers. This will give some teachers the opportunity to take on leadership roles at the school that ultimately may lead them out of the classrooms, but the benefit for students may be worth it. [More— [Teacher Magazine](#)] (April 9)

Raising Student Achievement

About 85 schools from 35 Ohio counties will participate in a new Algebra II test that one day could be given to all Ohio students in order to graduate from high school. Ohio joins 13 other states in a partnership overseen by the American Diploma Project at Achieve, a nonprofit group in Washington, D.C., that encourages states to raise academic standards. Starting with the class of 2014, Ohio students must pass an Algebra II course to earn a diploma. One challenge to the new policy is that not all schools' courses are the same. Those who created the test say it is an end-of-course test that will be given when a student completes the coursework. [More— [The Columbus Dispatch](#)] (March 17)

A recent study found that gifted African American students may under perform in school because of peer pressure to "act black." The new study, "*Another Look at the Achievement Gap: Learning From the Experiences of Gifted Black Students*," surveyed students about their attitudes and behaviors toward academic achievement, as well as their perceptions of social and peer pressures. The research was recently published in the journal *Urban Educator*. [More—[Education Week](#)] (March 19) (*paid subscription required*)

Children's board games may raise math skills of disadvantaged pre-kindergarten students, according to a study published in the journal [Child Development](#) and conducted by Carnegie Mellon professor Robert S. Siegler and University of Maryland assistant professor Geetha B. Ramani. The preschoolers from low-income homes made significant advances in counting and other skills after playing a game similar to "Chutes and Ladders" that required them to move markers along a horizontal path consisting of numbered squares. Dr. Siegler, who was a member of President Bush's National Mathematics Advisory Panel, explained "One of the many recommendations of the National Math Panel report was that we improve preschool mathematics curriculum, especially for low-income children. One of the easiest and most inexpensive ways to do this is to provide board games to Head Start centers, child-care centers serving low-income populations and perhaps individual parents." [More— [Pittsburgh Post Gazette](#)] (March 26)

Four underenrolled Advanced Placement courses will be eliminated after the 2008-2009 academic year in the first significant retrenchment of the college preparatory program in its 53-year history. The least popular courses—Italian, Latin literature, French literature, and computer science AB—will be eliminated, though there are no plans to cut more AP courses, according to the [College Board](#). Italian may be offered if a backer is found to provide funding. [More—[Washington Post](#)] (April 4)

School Improvement

An unusual pilot program that teaches students chess is under way in more than 100 second- and third-grade classrooms across Idaho. The state's education budget will pay for part of the program, and private funding will be secured for the rest. Teachers are trained in seminars before the school year begins, and they do not have to know chess ahead of time. The course, which is intended as curriculum enhancement, is bringing unexpected results, including leveling the playing field for students with limited English skills. [More—[New York Times](#)] (March 20) (*free registration required*)

The Kansas City School District is using intensified resources to track down dropouts and get them back in school. The district is using nine truant officers and 13 case managers and has started to receive help from volunteers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The district has tried to track more than 1,750 students who either dropped out or did not enter school at the start of the year. The district recruited more than 300 students back into school and is still looking for about 1,000 students. School officials and NAACP volunteers talk to families about solutions to get students back in school. [More—[Kansas City Star](#)] (March 19)

After years of reduced support, the Roanoke (Va.) school system is attempting to improve its art and music instruction. The new superintendent, Rita Bishop, is making it a priority so that students can improve in cultural literacy, she said. "Roanoke school officials say that a strong background in art complements other subjects and gives students a cultural literacy that will help them beyond standardized tests." [More—[Roanoke Times](#)] (March 21)

A pilot program in Summerville (S.C.) that will immerse middle school students in the arts in the hope of boosting test scores is getting students excited about school. The program differs from a rotating elective model practiced in most traditional schools and offers one class for an entire year. "Dorchester District 2 received a nearly \$900,000 [Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination](#) grant from the U.S. Department of Education in August 2006 to evaluate the effect of teaching the arts as a core subject area. District officials said Alston's success has pushed them to brainstorm ways to bring more arts courses to other schools." [More—[Charleston Post and Courier](#)] (March 25)

Retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law and College of Teacher Education and Leadership at Arizona State University in Tempe have started a new project known as the [Our Courts](#) project, a civics education initiative—a course O'Connor says has been neglected in recent years. She cited surveys showing that fewer than one-third of American adults can name the three branches of the federal government, and she lamented that most citizens know the judging panel on "American Idol," but fewer than one in 10 can name U.S. Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. "If we look at the adult population, whatever civics education people got in the past didn't seem to stick," Justice O'Connor said. [More—[Education Week](#)] (April 4) (*paid subscription required*)

In an effort to demonstrate the connection between academic achievement and the soft skills learned in after-school activities, a conference on after-school programs is asking why policymakers continue to separate the school day from what comes after, when what children really need is a seamless approach to learning and play. [More—[Providence Journal](#)] (April 8)

Teacher Quality and Development

Interpretation is at the heart of understanding history. At least that is how West Springfield High School (Va.) history teacher Jim Percoco sees it. He teaches history in an exciting, interactive way, that is the trend in today's teaching. Kelly Schrum, director of educational projects at George Mason University's Center for History and New Media, and one of the co-directors of the U.S. Department of Education's new National Clearinghouse for History Education, says, "If you teach history in an exciting way, students have a better framework and remember more." [More— [Washington Times](#)] (March 31)

Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Ill., a four-time Blue Ribbon School of Excellence award winner, has been successful in raising student achievement due in large part to its professional collaboration approach known as professional learning communities (PLCs). The PLCs are so well known that 3,000 people a year visit the school to observe them. They foster an atmosphere in which teachers learn from one another and share their colleagues' expertise so that students are the ones who benefit. [More—[Education Week](#)] (April 1) (*paid subscription required*)

Technology

In Gillette, Wyo., a virtual school will open next year as an official state school and will be open to students across the state. Previously enrollment was limited to the county where it was created, and the school was under-funded; however, state officials have stepped in to help pay for the distance learning approach. [More—[Associated Press](#)] (March 16)

Student email accounts at school have the potential to increase student achievement and success in the 21st century learning environment, according to a soon-to-be-released "Speak Up" survey by Project Tomorrow. Students use their e-mail accounts mostly for school-related communication. Teachers send reminders about upcoming tests and projects, and students who are absent can use their accounts to keep up with missed work. [More—[Education Week](#)] (Mar. 31) (*paid subscription required*)

Baltimore County (Md.) recently began piloting an online school program and joined a national trend of public school systems offering more online education options. The movement has gained momentum in the past five years, with at least 15 states offering some form of virtual schooling. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students in Maryland are doing well with the new pilot, but the population using it is intentionally limited to those who are home schooled and become public school students in order to minimize disruption. In February, the [North American Council for Online Learning](#) released a set of voluntary standards designed to guide states, school districts, online programs and other groups. [More—[Baltimore Sun](#)] (April 3)

Purpose

The purpose of the U.S. Department of Education's online newsletter *The Education Innovator* is to promote innovative practices in education; to offer features on promising programs and practices; to provide information on innovative research, schools, policies, and trends; and to keep readers informed of key Department priorities and activities. The Department's Office of Innovation and Improvement (OII) and the Office of Communications and Outreach (OCO) share the responsibility for the newsletter's research, writing, and production.

Douglas B. Mesecar, Assistant Deputy Secretary, OII, and Lauren Maddox, Assistant Secretary, OCO, sponsor *The Education Innovator*, which is published monthly and distributed through EDPUBS.

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Article Submissions

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