



Feature

- Key Resources

What's New ?

- From the U.S.
- Department of Education
- From the Office of Innovation and Improvement
- American History
- Arts Education
- Charter Schools
- Education Reform
- Mathematics and Science
- Raising Student Achievement
- Reading
- Teacher Quality and Development
- Technology

Innovations in the News

- Charter Schools/School Choice
- Raising Student Achievement
- School Improvement
- Teacher Quality and Development
- Technology

Purpose

Contributors

Disclaimer

Feature

Uncommon Schools: Boosting Student Achievement and Preparing Students for College and Beyond

“Build Great Schools. Get Results. Change History.” Uncommon Schools’ performance is living up to its motto. The non-profit charter school management organization starts and manages some of the most outstanding urban college preparatory charter schools in the Northeast, working to close the achievement gap and prepare low-income students to graduate from college. “Uncommon,” as it is known, builds these uncommonly great schools where leaders and teachers, and students and parents, are committed to excellence. Everyone at Uncommon is determined to make every minute count, so that 100 percent of its graduates attend and succeed in college.

Acknowledging Horace Mann’s common school movement of the 1800s, Uncommon founder Norman Atkins realized children from low income, urban families did not need common schools, but rather ones that are called by the organization’s Web site, “uncommonly good, extraordinary, autonomous, and distinctive.” In 1997, Atkins co-founded with James Verrilli the North Star Academy Charter School of Newark, N.J., and soon after formed Uncommon Schools as a public charity with the purpose of bolstering the North Star team’s ability to gather the resources needed to complete the facility that houses the Academy’s high school. Eight years later, based on its success in Newark, Uncommon Schools formalized its mission as a charter management organization to replicate North Star and other high-performing charters. Currently, Uncommon has 11 top performing schools in Newark, Brooklyn, and Rochester, N.Y., and has plans to grow to a network of 30 schools. On the 2008 New York Math and English/Language Arts Exams, all Uncommon schools posted exceptional results. Students also posted outstanding [results](#) on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge. An investment of up to \$1.7 million from New Schools Venture Fund will help Uncommon grow the network and provide greater opportunities and options for low-income students.

Although they differ in some ways, all Uncommon schools base their efforts to close the achievement gap on a set of proven structures and systems. They share key design features, including a college preparatory mission, high standards for academics and character, standards-based instructional models, effective curricula driven and informed by assessment, and highly structured environments. Because school leaders realize that there are distinct social challenges to educating low-income children, they have built a new kind of school to meet those challenges—in fact, more than a school—a community, one that both prioritizes measurable student academic achievement and seeks to teach values that build integrity and character.

Verrilli, co-founder and now serving as the North Star Academy Middle School principal, reflects on the school community that permeates all Uncommon schools. “It is a safe, structured, and well-disciplined environment that is focused on academic achievement. Students are part of something larger than themselves—a movement dedicated to changing history and closing the achievement gap.” Verrilli elaborates, “To do this we have the following structures: to build community we have a structured discipline system with high expectations for behavior; we wear uniforms to be on the same team and reduce materialistic distractions; we have a daily community circle that celebrates our core values of caring, respect, responsibility, justice and courage. For the academic achievement we have: a longer day and school year; an intense focus on teaching and professional development; and we use data from interim

assessments to improve our instruction. Lastly, we have a staff of people who care deeply about children and about changing history. To meet the challenges, there is no single 100 percent solution. It is the combination of one hundred 1 percent solutions.”

North Star Academy Demonstrates a Structured Program and Core Values

The North Star Academy takes its name from the star that has historically been known as a beacon, unwavering from its position in the night sky. The Academy helps students to follow the “star” to success in college and in life.

North Star Academy originally started as a middle school, though the high school has received the bulk of attention for its accomplishments – including that 100 percent of its high school graduates are college-bound. Compared with other high schools in Newark, where the student population is 80 percent low-income, 85 percent African-American, and only 2 percent of the students make it through college, North Star’s record is astonishing. North Star’s students are 90 percent low-income and 85 percent African-American and 15 percent Latino. The same “no excuses” school approach that has made the high school a success story has recently been applied to include an additional middle school campus and a new elementary school, resulting in consistent achievement gains for younger students, too.

Eighty-seven percent of North Star Academy 7th graders scored advanced or proficient on the 2008 New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) in Language Arts Literacy, compared to the state average of 70.4 percent and 81.5 percent of white students across the state. Ninety-five percent of 7th graders scored advanced or proficient on the 2007 NJASK in Math, compared to the state average of 62.3 percent and 74.8 percent of white students in the state. One hundred percent of 8th graders scored advanced or proficient on the 2008 NJASK in both Language Arts Literacy and Math.

Building the school is “intentional,” Verrilli notes. “Our brand new elementary school is designed to build a strong foundation in literacy, math, history and science. Students learn to work hard and focus on academics. We add a grade each year so we can build on the culture of success. The school began last year with a kindergarten and will grow until it is K-4. In the middle school, we currently take students from the Newark Public Schools into fifth grade (until our elementary school reaches fourth grade). Initially they have to be brought up to grade level in all of their subjects. Most are two to three years behind academically and so the achievement gap must be closed during middle school so that they will be college-ready by the time they finish high school.”

A Successful Elementary School: Responsibility, Community, and Ownership

Former North Star High School Principal and founding Elementary School Principal Julie Jackson says the day begins with a morning meeting at 7:40 a.m., though Susan Burnett St. Louis, parent of first-grader Illana St. Louis, views it as something more. She describes the morning meeting as “something that would make you cry.” She continues, “It’s beautiful. The scholars, as my daughter insists they are called, sit in a circle. Each class is named after a college, and each group does their college chant. They sing songs about caring and responsibility. The children love it. It sets the tone for the whole day.” And when classes end at 4 p.m., 90 of the 156 students stay for aftercare and after-school activities until 5:30 p.m. Ms. Burnett St. Louis notes that after-care has offered Illana everything from African dance, ballet and tap, to Girl Scouts.

Principal Jackson, a former Teach for America corps member and 1998 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year, moved quickly to assume a leadership position at North Star, also serving as the Dean of Students for two years. She describes the rigorous academic curriculum as one in which every day each child has at least three hours of literacy, which includes read aloud practice, guided reading, a reading mastery phonics program, and computer literacy, mainly in groups of eight or nine students. Mathematics is taught for 70 minutes each day and writing for 50 minutes. Social studies or science, and art, music or physical education are taught for 45 minutes a day, respectively.

“I wanted my child to have a thorough and challenging education,” Ms. Burnett St. Louis remembers, as she describes how she got into the entrance lottery on the advice of a friend who had raved about the school.

“My expectations have not only been met, they have been exceeded. In kindergarten, my child learned to read over one hundred sight words; she learned to count numbers up to 500 and add three digit numbers; she could write—on a topic. This year, she has been talking about the differences between fiction and realistic fiction—and this is first grade! I love the teachers. I have a voice in the school, and I know that if I have a voice, my daughter will have one, too.”

Circle time in the morning continues through middle and high school. It is a time when students declare that they will attend college and promise that they will not be late or make excuses. It is also the time when both teachers and students relate positive achievements they have experienced, such as the mastery of new material, books they have finished, or plans they have for special programs. All North Star students must sign a pledge that they will follow the core values of the school. While it may seem more intense than some schools and requires more diligence and hard work, Principal Verrilli is not fazed. Last year, on the U.S. Department of Education’s television show *Education News Parents Can Use*, he talked about the importance of the work the school has done. “When people fought for civil rights in the 1960s and were getting beaten and going to jail, they didn’t say, this is hard work, we’re not going to do it. They did it because it mattered. They said this matters. And this is why we are doing it.”

But student dedication and classroom teaching are not the only reason for the achievement gains. There is extensive family involvement and teacher professional development, too. In the elementary school, for example, Principal Jackson explains that parents are involved right from the beginning. “We meet with the parents in groups of 10 after the students have been accepted to the school. The meeting is a discussion about the school—the student-parent handbook, the academic and behavioral expectations we have for students, the expectations we have for parents, and what they can expect from us, as a school and as a family. Once a month we invite parents to our community circle. This is a ceremony where we celebrate student success, such things as homework superstars, perfect attendance, and student of the month. There are a series of rituals including songs, chants, and academic reviews that parents get to witness. Parents leave very inspired. There is also a reading log chart; parents are required to read to their child then record and sign the reading log. In addition to the homework there is a behavior log that teachers fill out daily, and parents read the log and sign it. There is space for them to also write a note back to the teacher. We call parents all the time, even if the issue is small.”

Parents have responded enthusiastically. According to Verrilli, parents want to have this kind of opportunity and want to have choices. “We have 2,000 people on the waiting list to get into our school. They want to have a choice. We make no excuses with our parents either. We tell them, this is how it is going to be at North Star, and you have the power to choose it or not choose it, and once you have chosen it, this is how we are going to do it. We see a school that has our children’s best interest at heart.”

Teachers benefit from the communication and interaction they have with each other and with their principals. They are frequently observed and receive feedback on their teaching, so they can improve. They meet with their principal to discuss instruction, data, curriculum planning, and lesson planning. The instruction is data driven and they have formal assessments that they use to drive the instruction, and these are put into a spreadsheet and analyzed during professional development sessions. In the summer, they have four weeks of intense, all-day professional development sessions, too.

Across the Uncommon Schools network, student academic achievement is soaring. Everyone involved with the schools is passionate and driven to help children succeed—to help close the achievement gap between economic groups. Like North Star Academy, they have made major progress. “This is the new civil rights movement of our era. It is not something that should happen, it is a moral obligation that we do this,” said Verrilli. “Kids are being failed all over the country, and instead of fighting for a seat on the bus or at the lunch counter, we are fighting for a seat in the college classroom or a seat in the courtroom as a lawyer, or a seat in the boardroom. North Star has created the Uncommon schools network for Newark and New York. This has to happen, it is a moral obligation.”

Key Resources

- [Uncommon Schools](#)
- [Uncommon Schools video](#)
- [North Star Academy of Newark](#)
- [NewSchools Venture Fund](#)
- [Fertile Soil For Charters](#)
A story about how Newark, N.J. is emerging as a model for other cities seeking to expand their charter school network. (Education Week, October 2008) (*paid subscription required*)
- [Quantity Counts: The Growth of Charter School Management Organizations](#)
This 2007 report is based on interviews with 10 CEOs of for profit Educational Management Organizations (EMO) and nonprofit Charter Management Organizations (CMO) managing 10 or more schools. It explores lessons from the experience of EMOs and CMOs and examines the common challenges and coping strategies of these organizations.
- [National Charter School Research Project \(NCSRP\)](#)
Located at the Center on Reinventing Public Education, the NCSRP's Web site offer research and information aimed at improving the charter school and broader education communities.

What's New ?

From the U.S. Department of Education

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings delivered a [speech](#) entitled *Educating America: The Will and the Way Forward* at the John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum at Harvard University in Cambridge, where she announced a [plan](#) to streamline FAFSA to make it easier and simpler for students seeking financial assistance for postsecondary studies. (Oct. 1) Under the plan, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) would be reduced from over 100 questions to 27, and students would learn how much aid they might qualify for before their senior year of high school.

On the heels of her speech at the Kennedy School, Secretary Spellings [visited](#) Charlestown High School in Boston to demonstrate [College.gov](#), which is a new Web site designed by the U.S. Department of Education to be a go-to online resource for credible information about college that also provides real life experiences of peers who are already attending college. (Oct. 2)

Secretary Spellings [delivered](#) remarks at the Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) symposium "Closing the Achievement Gap in Education and Employment Outcomes for At-Risk Minority Youth" in Washington, D.C. The symposium provided a forum for policymakers and education experts to discuss proven solutions and advance efforts to close achievement gaps. Secretary Spellings discussed student achievement under *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and continuing efforts to close the achievement gap and improve graduation rates. (Sept. 23)

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings [addressed](#) an international conference on special education entitled "2008 Global Summit on Education: Inclusive Practices for Students with Disabilities" where she [announced](#) \$7.5 million in grants to help develop more innovative and effective tests for students with disabilities and those with limited English skills. (Sept. 19)

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings [announced](#) the award of over \$106 million in Early Reading First grants to 31 recipients in 19 states and Washington, D.C., to improve the language and early literacy skills of young children. Reading First funds professional development; scientifically based instructional programs, materials and strategies; valid and reliable screening; diagnostic and ongoing classroom assessments; and statewide accountability and leadership structures. (Sept. 18)



U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education Raymond Simon poses with children at the 2008 Back to School Book Donation at the Jennie Moore Elementary School in Mt. Pleasant, S.C. The free books were provided by *First Book*.

U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education Raymond Simon and First Book Senior Vice President Lynda Lancaster [announced](#) the availability of free books through the 2008 Back to School Book Donation at the Jennie Moore Elementary School in Mt. Pleasant, S.C. South Carolina Deputy State Superintendent Mark Bounds, and Charleston County Superintendent Nancy J. McGinley, joined them for the announcement. The initiative will make available more than 300,000 new Random House books, which will be distributed nationally to schools, libraries and literacy organizations serving low-income youth. For more information, go to <http://www.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/bookcampaign/>. (Note: To be eligible to register with First Book, an entity must: (1) serve children, at least 50% of whom are from low-income households, (2) be a Title I or Title I-eligible school, or (3) be a military family support program.). (Sept. 30)

The White House recently released an important report on a mounting educational challenge affecting underserved students in America's cities: the rapid closure of faith-based urban schools. The report, [*Preserving a Critical National Asset: America's Disadvantaged Students and the Crisis in Faith-Based Urban Schools*](#) serves as a follow up to the [White House Summit on Inner-City Children and Faith-Based Schools](#), which occurred in April 2008. At the Summit, President Bush brought together educators, policymakers, community leaders, and others to develop strategies helping to preserve these valuable educational institutions.

In a statement made on October 3, the White House highlighted the significance of the problem. "Inner-city faith-based schools have helped educate generations of low-income American students. Yet, between the 1999-2000 and 2005-06 school years, the Nation lost nearly 1,200 of these faith-based schools, and those remaining had nearly 425,000 fewer students." In announcing the report, the White House stated, "The report chronicles the historical role of faith-based schools in America-particularly their service of low-income, urban populations-explains the caused of their rapid disappearance, and, most importantly, offers recommendations for reversing this dangerous trend. The White House believes that State and local governments, philanthropists, higher education institutions, educational entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders that take up these recommendations can help keep the doors of inner-city faith based schools open to America's disadvantaged students."

The next "Education News Parents Can Use" broadcast (October 21, 8:00-9:00 ET) will focus on preventing and mitigating safety breaches on college campuses and more effectively responding to emergencies if they occur. The U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies have developed safety guidance for the K-12 and higher education community based on a common framework. However, the nature of college life -- where students enjoy open campuses and considerably more freedom and privacy rights than younger students -- presents unique challenges. In turn, colleges and universities are encouraged to be thoughtful and comprehensive as they go about creating their own plans to provide a safe learning environment. The broadcast will highlight several Department programs available through the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools that



seek to enhance safety on campus; discuss the rights students and parents have under the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act* (FERPA); feature institutions that are leading the effort to enhance campus safety; and supply user-friendly tips for parents on the safety, health, and security of all students. To learn more, please visit www.ed.gov/edtv. To watch archived Web casts, please [click here](#).

From the Office of Innovation and Improvement

The [High-Quality Supplemental Educational Services and After-School Partnerships Demonstration program](#) recently awarded five grants to support partnerships between supplemental educational services (SES) programs and 21st Century Community Learning Centers projects to increase the academic achievement of low-income students in Title I schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring. The projects will serve as models of how these two federally authorized after-school initiatives can be coordinated, so that a greater number of students enroll in, participate in, and complete the academic after-school services that improve their achievement in reading and math. The three-year grants were awarded to: (1) Northwest Buffalo Community Center (NY), in partnership with the Boys and Girls Club of Northtowns of WNY and Huntington Learning Center; (2) Southwest Florida Workforce Development Board, in partnership with McCREL, AIR, and Si2; (3) the Latin American Youth Center (DC); (4) Santa Ana Unified School District (CA), in partnership with THINK Together; and (5) Albuquerque Public Schools (NM), in partnership with Advantage Tutoring, Rio Grande Educational Collaborative, and Youth Development Incorporated. (October 2008)

On Wednesday November 19th, 2008 3pm – 4:30pm EST the Office of Innovation and Improvement's (OII) Voluntary Public School Choice Program (VPSC) in collaboration with Nova Southeastern University (NSU) will sponsor Public School Choice: From Research to Practice. Dr. Mark Berends, Director of the USDOE/IES funded National Center on School Choice, will discuss the conditions that research has shown are needed to make school choice successful. Dr. Judith Stein, Executive Director of the National Institute of Educational Options at NSU, along with a panel of VPSC district administrators will discuss potentially replicable school choice practices with a focus on the four tenets of the VPSC program. Many practices are highlighted on www.buildingchoice.org. This event is a live webcast from the Florida Public School Choice Consortium's 4th Annual Conference. School, district, and state level administrators, and policymakers across the country who have an interest in approaches to implementing public school choice can [click here](#) to register for this event.

American History

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History has partnered with Verizon's Thinkfinity.org to create a new Web site called "[Smithsonian's History Explorer](#)." The new online tool offers free, standards-based, innovative resources for teaching and learning American history. Students can explore objects such as a \$100,000 U.S. Gold Certificate and go behind the scenes with museum curators to learn how exhibitions are put together. Teachers can search classroom activities and primary source documents. (October 2008)

Arts Education

October is National Arts and Humanities Month, coordinated by Americans for the Arts. It is the largest annual celebration of the arts and humanities in the country. From open houses at arts centers to mayoral proclamations, communities across the United States join to recognize the importance of arts and culture in their daily lives. Learn more about how you and your community can get involved [here](#). (October 2008)

The [Alliance for Young Artists and Writers](#) is now inviting students in grades seven through 12 to participate in the 2009 Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, the nation's largest and longest-running recognition program for youth interested in the visual and literary arts. More than 300,000 youth will be recognized regionally with additional opportunities for exhibition, publication, and scholarships. National award-winning art works from the 2008 competition currently are on year-long display at the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, D.C. (October 2008)

Charter Schools

Looking for a few good men and women to teach in public charter schools in your area? The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools recently launched a new Web-based tool called the "[Public Charter Schools Job Board](#)." Intended to match highly qualified professionals with positions supporting and working in public charter schools, this easy-to-use application connects users with charter schools, support organizations, authorizers and other employers. (September 2008)

Education Week's fifth annual [Leading for Learning](#) report, funded by The Wallace Foundation, examines leadership challenges unique to the charter school community. Specifically, the report includes new research from the National Charter Schools Research Project at the University of Washington regarding the characteristics of charter school principals and the issues these school leaders face. (September 2008)

According to a [survey](#) from the Center for Education Reform, Americans favor public charter schooling and other examples of public school choice. While more than three-quarters of those surveyed did not correctly identify public charter schools as public schools, when given a clear definition, 78 percent of respondents supported "allowing communities to create new public schools called charter schools that would be held accountable for student results and would be required to meet the same academic standards and testing requirements as other public schools." (Aug. 25)

Education Reform

A new center for education research, supported by philanthropist Eli Broad and led by economics professor Roland G. Fryer Jr., will soon open soon at [Harvard University](#). The [Education Innovation Laboratory](#) (or "EdLabs") will enable economists and educators to study strategies for improving K-12 public education. Research will focus on three cities: New York, Washington, and Chicago. (Sept. 25)

Many college freshmen learn a difficult lesson in their first few weeks on campus: despite earning a high school diploma, they are unprepared for college-level academics. According to a new report, [Diploma to Nowhere](#), from Strong American Schools, which sponsors the "ED in '08" initiative, colleges and taxpayers spend over \$2 billion annually on remedial classes aimed at teaching students material they did not learn in high school. (Sept. 15)

Mathematics and Science

The National Science Foundation Web site offers a [multi-media gallery](#) that includes nearly 100 videos and web casts on a wide range of science-related topics. Some of these include an analysis of "stormy weather" on the sun; a video examining how the popular *Star Wars* movies relate to various science concepts; and a lecture by climate expert, Richard Alley. The video clips are searchable by keyword or phrase. (October 2008)

Every year, Intel Corp. selects U.S. schools that have demonstrated excellence in mathematics and science and designates them as "[Intel Schools of Distinction](#)." One elementary, one middle and one high school in each of the two categories – mathematics and science – receive \$10,000 in grants, among other prizes. This year, the winning schools represented states from California to Kansas. (September 2008)

Raising Student Achievement

A new research [brief](#) from the California Dropout Research Project examines what happened to students who were scheduled to graduate in 2004, but dropped out of high school during their sophomore year. According to the brief, in 2006 – two years after their scheduled graduation – over one-third of these students were neither going to school (high school or college) nor working. Nationwide, four years after dropping out, 30 percent of students were not in school and not working. (Sept. 11)

A new [report](#) from the National Center for Children in Poverty reveals that children who are chronically absent in kindergarten perform at the lowest levels in reading, mathematics, and general knowledge in first grade. According to the analysis, the effects of missing at least 10 percent of the school year in kindergarten

extend to the end of elementary school for children in poverty, with these students continuing to score the lowest in reading and mathematics even into fifth grade. (September 2008)

Recent research shows that there may be consistent academic factors that can be used to predict whether a student is likely to drop out of school. The Alliance for Excellent Education has released an issue [brief](#) that explores the “predictive power of early-warning data” and discusses policies that can support efforts to use this data to keep children in school. (August 2008)

Reading

The [News Literacy Project](#) is an innovative national program designed to mobilize journalists in an effort to help secondary-school students sort fact from fiction in the digital age. The initiative’s mission is to give students the tools to be savvy consumers of credible information they find in the media. The project will create partnerships between active and retired journalists and English, social studies and history teachers as well as after-school media clubs. (October 2008)

Teacher Quality and Development

Demand for new teachers is expected to exceed 1.5 million over the next decade, according to some estimates. A new national [survey](#) from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and funded by MetLife Foundation reveals that 42 percent of college-educated Americans aged 24 to 60 would consider entering the teaching profession. The survey also indicates that the United States could improve teacher quality and better retain teachers by increasing teachers’ starting salaries and providing better preparation for the classroom. (Sept. 10)

Research shows that there is a shortage of science teachers nationwide, and that without adequate support, 66 percent of new teachers will quit the profession within three years. A [report](#) from the New Science Teachers’ Support Network at George Mason University offers school leaders advice on the most important forms of support specific to science teachers. Among the recommendations are access to high-quality courses about science instruction and in-class teaching mentors who are retired science educators. (Sept. 9)

Technology

PBS has launched a new resource for teachers, media specialists, early childhood instructors, and other education professionals called “[PBS Teachers Connect](#).” The online tool is designed so that users may share ideas, collaborate, and support the effective implementation of technology in schools. Through an already established Web site, “PBS Teachers,” users can search more than 3,000 standards-based classroom activities, lesson plans, and interactive resources; then, they can easily bookmark, organize, and share their “tagged” content within the PBS Teachers Connect portal. (October 2008)

[Education Development Center, Inc.](#) has been [awarded](#) \$9.2 million by the U.S. Department of Education to serve as a national research and development center focusing on instructional technology. The center will investigate how video games can be used as educational tools in middle school classrooms. (Sept. 10)

Innovations in the News

Charter Schools/School Choice

A “seminal experiment in whether a charter operator can transform a large, troubled urban school” is underway in Los Angeles, where Green Dot Public Schools, a charter schools operator, has taken over Locke High School. From the outset, Green Dot is making changes, among them splitting the formerly comprehensive high school into seven separate academies. L.A. Schools Superintendent David L. Brewer said that Green Dot will continue to accept all children from the school’s established attendance area. The costs of the changes are expected to have the school operating at a deficit for the first four years, but this initial gap is being met through gifts from local benefactors. [More—The [Los Angeles Times](#)] (Sept. 18)

The city of Yonkers, although located in Westchester County, New York, is far from the wealthy stereotype of the city of that same name. In 2006-07, fewer than half of Yonkers high school graduates went on to

four-year colleges, and Yonkers students have the lowest pass rate on the state Regents exams in Westchester County. But with the help of the College Board, the Bill and Melinda Gates and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundations, a new high school, Palisade Preparatory, is offering an alternative for students. Based on a philosophy that all children can achieve, Palisade enrolls students based on their selection of it as one of their top three high school choices. Enrollment in each grade is capped at 80 students and extra instructional time of three hours a week is built into the school's schedule. [More—[The New York Times](#)] (Sept. 14)

Raising Student Achievement

In Minnesota, with financial support from the legislature, state educators are taking a more in-depth look at Response to Intervention (RTI), a data-driven approach to reading and math, and are providing training and other support to schools that want to adopt the approach. Nearly 40 schools and districts are receiving coaching in RTI under a \$1 million, two-year initiative. Interest in the RTI approach is twofold: its reported effectiveness at increasing reading proficiencies at the elementary level and reductions in the number of students needing special education services. [More—[The Minneapolis Star Tribune](#)] (Sept. 8)

In Central Texas, high school students who take engineering courses can earn college credit from Austin Community College and two state university campuses, thanks to the E3 Alliance, a regional education collaborative. The courses are part of national program, Project Lead the Way, which designs and accredits them, and develops both curriculum and professional development for engineering education at the middle and high school levels. [More—[Austin Business Journal](#)] (Aug. 29)

School Improvement

It seems like a classic case of delayed response that recommendations put forward a quarter century ago about the need for more school time from *A Nation at Risk* are now gaining increasing attention nationwide. Calls for an added hour to the school day and 20 to 40 days to the school year in that 1983 report are now gaining traction in places such as Massachusetts, where a three-year old initiative to expand learning time is being implemented in 26 schools statewide. In another current development, eight communities are awaiting word from the Mott Foundation about grants to implement an expanded learning format that entails a “seamless learning experience” that occurs both inside and outside the school building. [More—[Education Week](#)] (Sept. 22)

Teacher Quality and Development

A new elementary school in Riverside, Calif., doubles as a living laboratory where pre-service teachers observe teachers and students in real time and also take their undergraduate classes in early-childhood education and child development. The arrangement is a collaboration between Riverside Community College and the Alford Unified Schools, and the combined-purpose facility is the Innovative Learning Center at Phillip M. Stokoe Elementary School. The adult classes at the Center are integrated into several clusters of elementary classrooms that are connected by observation corridors with two-way mirrors. “The whole intent of the massing and the design of the school,” according to principal John Nichols, “was to allow the facility itself to be a teaching tool.” [More—California's [Press-Enterprise](#)] (Sept. 15)

Technology

Across the country, electronic games are winning over educators as their effectiveness in the classroom becomes more apparent. According to Brock Dubbels, a teacher at Seward Montessori School in Minneapolis, “the big idea is to identify what students are already invested in, and that’s video games.” Taking the concept a step further, Katie Salen, an associate professor of design and technology at the Parsons School of Design in New York, hopes to open a new public school “with a game-centered curriculum.” Lessons would be approached as quests, utilizing Salen’s view that “games create a need in kids to figure something out.” [More—[Christian Science Monitor](#)] (Sept. 19)

Elementary students in a Florida school got a lesson in technological efficiency when they used a hand-held keypad to take a math test. The device, called a student responder, electronically submits multiple-choice and true/false answers to a computer. Teachers can instantly see individual responses and overall results

from a test, which allows them to make timely judgments of how well their students are doing. In addition to eliminating the time teachers spend grading, the responders also reduce the use of paper and pencils in the classroom. [More—[The Tampa Tribune \(Fla.\)](#)] (Sept. 12)

Schools across the country are shifting from paperbacks and copied handouts to online textbooks and articles. The movement is saving trees and saving teachers valuable time in and out of the classroom. Kerri Serrano, a government teacher in Virginia, values the flexibility it has given her in the classroom. “If something’s not working,” she said, “I don’t have to stick with that for the rest of the day because that’s all I have copies of.” Classrooms are not the only place where paper is being exchanged for laptops. School boards are following the trend as well and finding beneficial results. [More—[Education Week \(premium article access compliments of Edweek.org\)](#)] (Sept. 4)

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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