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Purpose

The purposes of the U.S. Department of Education's online newsletter *The Education Innovator* are: 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.

Editor's Note

The Education Innovator will take a brief break in December. Look for the next issue at the end of January 2008.

Feature

NCLB Blue Ribbon Schools of Choice: Innovating to Achieve the Goals of NCLB

For films, the top prize is the Oscar.

In professional football, it's the Super Bowl ring.

And since 1982, the highest honor in K-12 education has been the Blue Ribbon Schools award. Renamed the No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon Schools Program in 2002, the designation from the U.S. Department of Education annually honors public and private schools whose student achievement scores are among the best in their respective state or schools whose scores have shown sustained and dramatic gains. Only a few hundred schools realize this accomplishment each year, and those that do are justifiably very proud.

While the No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon Schools award recognizes outstanding public and private schools across the nation, the program intends to help everyone by making research-based, effectiveness criteria available to all schools so that they can assess themselves and plan improvements. The program also encourages schools to share information about best practices that lead to educational success. As U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings has said, "Blue Ribbon Schools are proving that, when we raise the bar, our children will rise to the challenge."

Among the recipients of the 2007 award are a number of schools of choice, including public charter schools, magnet schools, and private and parochial schools. All 287 Blue Ribbon awardees that were honored in a recognition ceremony in mid-November in Washington, D.C. have remarkable stories behind the efforts that led to their respective achievements, and the schools of choice are no exception. They responded to their own unique challenges with a variety of approaches, including innovative and student-centric instructional programs, alternative and longer school days and schedules, enrollment of students from a range of neighborhoods, districts, or communities, racial and ethnic as well as socio-economic diversity but, most importantly, a clear pattern of student achievement and success.

Each year, the Department determines how many schools each state may nominate and notifies each Chief State School Officer. The numbers of submissions are based on the number of K-12 students and the number of public schools in the individual state. The Council for American Private Education is responsible for nominating private schools. To be eligible, schools must meet either of two assessment criteria: at least 40 percent of their students from disadvantaged backgrounds have dramatically improved student performance in accordance with state assessment systems, or the schools have scored in the top 10 percent overall on state assessments.

In this article, we look at three different schools of choice being recognized this year to illustrate how they are achieving the goals of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). Key ingredients of their success, which they share with other Blue Ribbon Schools, include committed and visionary leaders; the involvement of teachers, parents, families, and their communities; well-rounded and challenging curricula; and positive track records where closing the achievement gap is concerned—are ones for which these three schools have especially interesting stories and instructive lessons to impart.

A Magnet High School with Visionary Leadership and Rigorous Curriculum

When Dr. Gloria Crutchfield became principal of [Suncoast Community High School](#) in Riviera Beach, Florida, she found a school that had already experienced a cultural shift, evolving from one that had been academically stagnant and underachieving and had been investigated for civil rights violations to a school that had become one of Palm Beach County Schools' first magnet high schools. (In 1989, its initial implementation was supported in part through a Magnet Schools Assistance Program grant from the U.S. Department of Education). According to school district officials, Suncoast was a school that overcame "all odds and all nay-sayers" to become a huge success, with one local newspaper describing Suncoast as "arguably the best school in Florida."



Gloria Crutchfield, principal, Suncoast Community High School; Pam Miller, Vice Principal, Challenge Charter School; and Valerie Zemko, principal, St. Colette School, proudly represent their schools, honored as 2007 NCLB Blue Ribbon Schools awardees. (left to right)

Suncoast focuses on preparing students for the 21st century, offering the International Baccalaureate (IB) as well as programs in mathematics, science and engineering, computer science, and interdisciplinary studies. The school attracts a diverse student population from 13 public middle schools, eight public high schools, and 23 private schools.

Dr. Crutchfield was familiar with the school because 10 years earlier she had worked at the school as a guidance counselor before changing her career path to educational leadership. She served as an elementary and middle school principal before being selected as the principal at Suncoast in 2005. She believed that "as great as the school was when I came here, I felt they could go to the next level." Reflecting on her goals, she said, "I wanted to lead the school in a way that it would serve ALL students, not just the ones who could already do the work. I had very high expectations for ALL students and ALL teachers." She admitted that getting "buy-in" was difficult at first. "Initially there was resistance. Some parents, teachers, and students complained that it was too hard, but I told them straight out that if you don't work hard, you will be left behind. We're not only competing with students from Florida and the entire United States, we're competing internationally." She said that there was some turnover, but she eventually "infused" all the students and trained all the teachers in Advanced Placement (AP). "This comprehensive model of change, implementing data-driven best practices, instructional alignment, vertical teaming, and assessment, in tandem with high-level expectations for all, has fostered a climate of excellence serving to prepare a diverse student population for a rigorous post-secondary education." By encouraging a more demanding curriculum, Suncoast gave even average students higher goals. This attitude and visionary leadership has earned Suncoast not only the 2007 Blue Ribbon honor, but it was recently ranked as the fifth best high school in the nation by [Newsweek](#) magazine.

Innovation, Dedication, and Achievement at an Elementary Charter School

Twelve years ago, Greg Miller and his wife, Pam Miller, founded [Challenge Charter School](#) in Glendale, Arizona, as the first official Core Knowledge School in that state. Currently, their daughter, Wendy Miller, who represented the school at the 2007 Blue Ribbon School award ceremony, also has a leadership role at the school, serving as their vice principal. The school is not only family-run, but the teachers also are part of an extended family and part of what creates the unique culture at Challenge. "I feel every day that I am making a difference," said Vice Principal Pam Miller. She said that strong leadership has been key to the success at Challenge, an elementary school serving over 600 students. "Mr. Miller, the principal, has had to show consistent leadership. He is always looking at the child. He has had to stand his ground on making some hard decisions, but it has paid off."

The Administration has an open door policy for both staff and parents. Prior to enrollment, Challenge offers parents the chance to meet the Principal and Founder, tour the school facilities, and receive information about the mission, environment, and curriculum. Upon enrollment, the parent-school compact is signed and establishes the collaborative relationship between home and school. "Collaboration is key," according to Vice Principal Miller. "Our relationship with parents is vital to student success, (as it is in many charter schools) and our collaborative decision-making with the classroom teachers is a big part of it. We meet with the teachers at least once a month; they are part of decisions on resources and the direction of curriculum, and it's paying off." A key result of this type of collaborative effort and a focus on the student has been the elimination of the achievement gap. "All of our kids have high expectations, and all of them are achieving at high levels. We treat them all the same. Since they all wear uniforms, it assists in preventing socio-economic status from being an issue," she said.

Challenge uses a student assessment program that integrates daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, semi-annual, and annual assessments of several different types and measures to ensure correct student placement, instruction, and growth, according to Vice Principal Miller. This approach has raised student and school performance on norm-referenced tests by over 72 percent in reading, 200 percent in math, and 130 percent in language arts since 1997. The faculty uses assessment results to improve classroom effectiveness and ensure that none of the students is left behind or alternatively left unchallenged. The school always communicates its assessment results to parents in a format that can be easily understood by all and gives the measurement in relationship to state and national norms.

The curriculum at Challenge Charter School is based on the Core Knowledge Sequence. "In Core Knowledge, we build on a pyramid where the bottom is the widest," said Vice Principal Miller. "In Kindergarten, the children learn a great many things, and we start to specialize as they get older. For example, they learn the names of all of the continents in Kindergarten. By second grade when they are studying Egypt, they review the continents and learn more about the specific place. We also integrate foreign language, art, technology, music, and physical education." Challenge shares its approach and success with other educators in several different ways, including having the teachers make lesson presentations to other educators, having the administrators serve on state curriculum committees, and by providing mentoring and program development time to the Arizona community at large.

The teachers use strategies to ensure that the content and skills that are introduced are accessible to every learner. Group learning is one of the most important strategies. They also use a hands-on teaching approach—activities such as doing science experiments, playing games, or using manipulatives to solve math problems.

The [Center for Education Reform](#) recently honored Challenge as a 2007 Charter School of the Year, one of 53 schools honored out of 3,940 charter schools nationwide, exemplifying the innovation, achievement, and dedication of the charter school movement.

Family Involvement Keeps A School Running

Nowhere is parent and family engagement more important than at the small, private, parochial [St. Colette School](#) in Rolling Meadows, Illinois. Involvement begins at age three with the school's early education program, one in which the parents and children are introduced to religion, mathematics, reading, art, music, and science through developmentally appropriate lessons and activities. This preschool beginning, with its emphasis on the involvement of the family, continues through eighth grade and sets the stage for the school's philosophy of students taking an increasing degree of ownership of their educations, but with the continued support of their parents. School Board is made up entirely of parents," said Ms. Valerie Zemko, the long-time principal of the school. "The parents are exceptional. They help with everything from curriculum planning, setting goals, budgeting, helping with social activities, tutoring—they are a key factor in our success."

Parents, students, and teachers are stakeholders in the successful curriculum as well. "We are data driven," said Zemko, "and we keep close track of the students who need extra help. We look at the individual students and, if we need to provide more help, we get the parent, student and teacher involved. We create daily and long-term goals by graphing out an aim line to show the students' progress. If, after meeting twice in 12 weeks, we don't see improvement, we change procedures so the student can see (on the graph) their own progress. It gets everyone to be invested and helps the student see what he or she is proud of and where he or she can do better. I find that's so important; they can see their own progress and everyone is working together."

The broad curriculum at St. Colette is one that develops the intellectual, social, physical, and spiritual aspects of each student and involves 11 areas of learning based on four guiding principles: research-based learning; interdisciplinary curriculum; measurable impacts, and adaptability to individual learning needs.

The commitment to integration is of particular note. Care is taken to ensure that students understand that lessons learned in one subject are applicable across the curriculum and in real life. St. Colette uses the nationally administered Terra Nova test, which acts as a tool to benchmark the school's performance on a national scale. Students are tested annually from second grade through eighth grade, providing regular feedback on student progress. They have attained outstanding scores in all subject areas, including math and reading, as shown on the Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) scores. St. Colette students have consistently performed in the top 10 percent of schools nationally.

"The involvement of our families and community make us a team," said Zemko. "We call ourselves the Tiger Team. We have school spirit. We cheer each other's successes."

Cheering goes hand in hand with receiving the Blue Ribbon School award. On November 13, 2007, two representatives each from these three schools of choice beamed with pride as they sat with the many other honorees near the colorful banner bearing the Blue Ribbon School name. As the name of their school was called, ceremoniously, state-by-state, they made their way to the stage knowing that they are each playing an exceptional role in the success of our nation's children.

Key Resources

- [Charter Schools Program](#), Office of Innovation and Improvement (OII)
- [Council for American Private Education](#)
- [Magnet Schools of America](#)
- [Magnet Schools Program](#), OII
- [National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)
- [NCLB Blue Ribbon Schools Program](#)
- [Office of Non-Public Education](#), OII

Please send questions, comments, and suggestions to [The Innovator Webmasters](#).



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What's New ?

From the U.S. Department of Education

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings [transmitted](#) the congressionally mandated National Assessment of Title I [Final Report](#) to the House Committee on Education and Labor. The report shows the need to continue assessing all children, while maintaining a commitment to helping states develop challenging standards, but also shows that states have made substantial progress in implementing the provisions of NCLB. The report points to areas that require much more work, such as stagnant high school achievement, achievement gaps not closing fast enough, and too few students receiving free tutoring. (Nov. 15)

The winners of the 2007 *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Blue Ribbon Schools Program were honored this month at an awards ceremony in Washington, D.C. This year there were 287 award-winning schools, representing each state, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The program honors public and private elementary, middle, and high schools that are either academically superior or that demonstrate dramatic gains in student achievement. The list of 2007 honorees is available [online](#). (Nov. 12-13)

Education Secretary Margaret Spellings delivered [remarks](#) at The LEAGUE town hall meeting at Midtown West School in New York City. She noted that schools play an important role in developing character and teaching lessons such as self-respect, integrity, and responsibility. (Nov. 5)

Secretary Spellings [announced](#) the national distribution of 520,000 free books as part of the 2007 Adolescent Readers Initiative during a visit to Webb Middle School in Austin, Texas. The initiative will help improve the literacy skills of struggling adolescent readers in low-income schools and communities. The U.S. Department of Education and First Book, a national, nonprofit organization, will distribute the Townsend Press books to schools, libraries, and community groups serving low-income, middle school and early adolescent-aged youth across the country. (Nov. 2)

The November 20th edition of the Department's live monthly television show, "Education News Parents Can Use," focused on how the Department, institutions of higher education, and key stakeholders are working to better prepare students for postsecondary education and jobs of the 21st century. Today, more than 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs require higher education and/or training. Three-quarters of those jobs require a college degree. Yet, 60 percent of Americans have no postsecondary credentials, and only one-third have a degree. Many Americans who want to go to college decide not to, either because they are not prepared or cannot afford to do so. To address these challenges, Secretary Spellings formed the Commission on the Future of Higher Education in 2005, which facilitated a dialogue on the vital issues of accessibility, affordability, and accountability. Based on the Commission's findings, Spellings developed and began implementing a detailed [Action Plan](#). The broadcast discussed the plan, and explored strategies to better prepare students for college and help them succeed once they are enrolled. For more information, go to the [Education News Parents Can Use Web site](#). To access the archived webcast of the show, visit [http://www.connectlive.com/events/ednews/.](http://www.connectlive.com/events/ednews/) (November 2007)



The U.S. Department of Education announced the names of the 2007 American Stars of Teaching [award winners](#), who are outstanding classroom teachers across all grade levels and disciplines. Awards were announced at special assemblies at the schools where the honored teachers work. Parents, students, colleagues, school administrators, and others nominated these exemplary teachers who they believed have the qualities to be an American Star of Teaching. One teacher was recognized from each state, as well as 4 private school teachers. [Nominations](#) for 2008 American Stars of Teaching will open in January. (November 2007)

The Department recently unveiled a new Web site "Doing What Works" to support educators working toward NCLB's goal of having every student proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014. ["Doing What Works"](#) offers an online library of proven instructional resources. It draws primarily from evaluations of research findings compiled for the What Works Clearinghouse, which was established in 2002 by the [Institute of Education Sciences](#). (November 2007)

Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announced the availability of new brochures that provide guidance on the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ([FERPA](#)) to enable schools to better balance students' privacy rights with school safety concerns. The brochures on FERPA--one for K-12 educators, one for higher education officials, and one for parents--are a timely refresher to help institutions to balance student privacy and school safety. They serve as a follow-up to the school safety roundtables conducted by Secretary Spellings, former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, and Secretary of Health and Human Services Mike Leavitt earlier this fall. (Oct. 30)

From the Office of Innovation and Improvement

The newest book in the *Innovations in Education* series, *Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online*, will be launched via a live webcast on December 12, 2007, at 3:00 p.m. (EST) from the National Press Club. Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement Morgan Brown will moderate a panel of online learning experts. Discussion topics will include services to expect from online providers, matching students to appropriate online coursework, and ensuring course quality. Please register now to participate in the webcast [online](#). (Nov. 29)

Assistant Deputy Secretary Brown participated in the [American Enterprise Institute's](#) research conference on the "Supply Side of School Reform and the Future of Educational Entrepreneurship, where ventures like Teach For America, the KIPP Academies, and New Leaders for New Schools are reinventing the definition and delivery of public education. Among the topics addressed at the conference were the challenges that these and other innovative programs encounter in such strategic areas as raising financial capital, finding qualified employees, and overcoming regulatory barriers to entry into schools and districts. A [webcast](#) of the event and abstracts of papers presented at the conference are available. (Oct. 25)

American History

The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History has [announced](#) its 2008 Summer Seminars. The two-day sessions address a range of American history topics. Among the new topics and presenters for 2008 are the following: Justice Sandra Day O'Connor on *The American Judiciary*; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Higginbotham on *African American Lives*; and Michael Lazin and Michael Flamm on *The Sixties in Historical Perspective*. (November 2007)

Arts Education

Music education is linked to lifelong educational attainment and higher incomes in a new [poll](#) from Harris Interactive and MENC: The National Association for Music Education. Nearly 88 percent of people polled with postgraduate degrees participated in music education. Further, 83 percent of those with incomes higher than \$150,000 participated in music. (Nov. 12)

The [American Architectural Foundation](#) and Target have announced that the winner of the first-ever "[Redesign Your School Contest](#)" is Tyler J. Rush, a senior at Westlake High School in Austin, Texas. The national contest asked high school students to design their ideal learning environments. Rush's winning design, the "Light and Nature School," incorporates principles of sustainability, various learning styles, classroom flexibility, and cutting-edge technology. (Nov. 1)

"[Perfect Pitch](#)," a new feature of [ArtsEdge](#), is designed to introduce students in fifth through eighth grades to musical instruments. This Web-based, multimedia exploration enables students to "meet" orchestral instruments. Students can mix and match instrument sounds to create an orchestral team, and then test their musical know-how in an interactive quiz. (November 2007)

Charter Schools/Choice

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools has released [data](#) showing that New Orleans has the nation's highest percentage of children attending charter schools, with Dayton, Ohio, Washington, D.C., and Southfield, Michigan, tying for second. The Alliance's annual study identifies communities with the largest percentages of students enrolled in public charter schools. (Oct. 22)

Education Reform

Harvard political scientist Paul Peterson aims to correct what he sees as methodological flaws in RAND Corporation's recent evaluation of Philadelphia's privately managed public schools. In his newest report, Peterson uses student-level data to compare gains in student achievement among for-profit, nonprofit, and district-run schools. The report is available [online](#). (November 2007)

The [Kentucky Long-Term Policy Research Center](#) recently ranked the 50 states on the basis of 11 educational indicators, such as the percentage of citizens with high school diplomas and two and four-year college degrees, as well as students' scores on national standardized tests. Kentucky has [moved](#) from 43rd to 34th nationally in education over the last 13 years, according to the report. (October 2007)

A recent [study](#) by McKinsey & Company examines some of the highest performing school systems in the world, details what they have in common, and highlights the tools they use to improve student performance. The experiences of the top school systems suggest that three things matter most: 1) getting the right people to become teachers; 2) developing these people into effective instructors; and 3) ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child. (September 2007)

Parental Involvement

Parents are getting more involved in their children's education, according to [new Census data](#). Among other things, parents are reading more to their children and placing more restrictions on their television viewing than they did 10 years earlier. Experts say that the data confirm a trend of more protective, involved parenting that has been developing for some time. (Oct. 31)

Raising Student Achievement

[Geography Awareness Week](#) was sponsored this year by the National Geographic Society as part of a multi-year campaign to highlight the diversity of peoples, places, and natural wonders around the globe. The yearlong focus this year will be on Asia. (Nov. 11-17)

International Education Week (IEW) was founded in 2000 by the Departments of Education and State to provide an opportunity for foreign students living in the United States to share their cultures with their American classmates. For ideas and materials to continue to celebrate diversity, as well as a quiz about cities of the world, visit IEW [online](#). (Nov. 12-16)

The College Board has listed on its [Web site](#) those Advanced Placement (AP) courses considered rigorous enough to carry the AP designation. Nationwide, two-thirds of the 130,000 courses that were audited were immediately approved, and most others made sufficient changes to make the list, according to Thomas Matts, who directed the board's audit. A few thousand courses remain under review. (Nov. 2)

For the first time in more than 40 years, the majority of American children in public schools in the South are poor, according to a Southern Education Foundation [report](#). In 11 Southern states, the number of poor children attending public schools is above 50 percent of the total student body. (November 2007)

School Leadership

State governments, universities, and school districts need to do more in tandem to improve principal training programs, according to a [report](#) by the [Southern Regional Education Board](#). The report reveals that many master's degree programs in administration and school leadership are not selective, and many graduates either lack skills needed to bring about substantial school reforms or do not go on to become principals. (Nov. 8)

Dr. Elizabeth Reilinger, chair of the Boston School Committee, [received](#) the 2007 Richard R. Green Award, the nation's highest honor for urban education leadership, at the Council of the Great City Schools' 51st Annual Fall Conference, held in Nashville, Tennessee. (Nov. 7)

School Safety

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) has provided schools and parents with a concise summary of [guidelines](#) on how to prevent the spread of drug-resistant staph infections—*methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA)—that have caused concern nationwide. Several states have reported infections and even some deaths among minors. (Oct. 26)

Teacher Quality and Development

The Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program, sponsored by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, supports projects to recruit and educate the next generation of librarians, develop faculty and library leaders, and conduct research on the library profession. All types of libraries, except federal and for-profit libraries, may apply. The [application](#) deadline is Dec. 17. (Nov. 29)

The [e-Learning for Educators](#) (efE) project, a collaborative venture among eight public television stations and their respective state departments of education, is looking for upper-elementary and middle school English language arts and mathematics teachers to participate in a research [study](#) that will evaluate the impact of online professional development on teacher knowledge, instructional practices, and student achievement. Eligible teachers who successfully complete three workshops in the study will receive 90 contact hours of professional development, and earn a \$300 stipend from Boston College, whose researchers are the principal investigators of the study. (November 2007)

The publisher of *Education Week* has launched a new biannual [resource guide](#) on teacher professional development, available online for free. The first issue of the *Teacher Professional Development Sourcebook* focuses on the role that teachers' collaborative work has on improving instruction and includes research overviews, data on current practices and requirements, and a directory of more than 200 K-12 professional development products and services. (Fall 2007)

Technology

To help education leaders and policymakers implement teaching and learning strategies for the 21st century, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills has launched "[Route 21](#)," a Web portal for information, resources, and tools related to 21st century skills. The portal showcases how 21st century skills can be supported through standards, assessments, professional development, curriculum and instruction, and learning environments. (November 2007)

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Arts Education

Steven Van Zandt, a guitarist with Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band, is collaborating with Scholastic's InSchool division to produce and distribute a curriculum and instructional support materials for middle and high schools in the U.S. Titled, *Little Steven's Rock and Roll High School*, the effort is intended to reach all students, "whether a musician, a rock 'n' roll fan, or not," according to Van Zandt, who feels the uniquely American musical form is "so interesting that you will be absolutely compelled to listen to it, and maybe even learn to play it." Van Zandt will be the creator of the content and expects to involve other musicians and rock journalists. [More— [USA Today](#)] (Nov. 12)

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, with the help of a special endowment, is helping 18 elementary and middle schools to re-establish art education, assist teachers in making connections between art and other academic subjects, and preparing their students for a new arts high school slated to open in 2009. Called LACMA On-Site, the initiative is receiving \$1 million annually from a bequest from Anna Bing Arnold, a philanthropist and art collector, and will provide teaching artists for two years in the elementary schools and four years in the participating middle schools. The privately supported initiative is supplementing other publicly funded revitalization efforts for the arts in Los Angeles schools and throughout the state. [More—[Los Angeles Times](#)] (Nov. 7) (*free registration required*)

No Child Left Behind

A recent study offers evidence to dispute the notion that NCLB is pressuring educators in struggling schools to focus on the "bubble kids"—students who fall just below the passing threshold on state tests—at the expense of students at the high and low ends of the achievement spectrum. [More— [Hoover Institution Education Next](#)] (November 2007)

Reading

A new [study](#) released by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) finds that Americans of every age are reading less and less for pleasure. The report, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, gathered statistics from a number of studies on the reading habits of Americans of all ages and found a decline in reading for pleasure as well as a decline in test scores. [More—[USA Today](#)] (Nov. 19)

An internationally renowned physician who was encouraged by his mother to read instead of watch television is helping schools nationwide create reading rooms where elementary school students can discover and further their love of reading. Dr. Ben Carson, a neurosurgeon at Johns Hopkins University Hospital, through the Carson Scholars Fund that he established, has helped 38 schools to create reading rooms as special places where there are not only books but community and parent volunteers to encourage students in their reading adventures. The most recent room to be opened is at Swansfield Elementary School in Columbia, Maryland, which received an \$11,000 grant from the Carson Scholars Fund. [More— [Washington Post](#)] (Nov. 8) (*free registration required*)

A new, online tool to evaluate literacy programs and students' reading skills is available free from the Verizon Foundation's [Thinkfinity.org](#). Developed by the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) with funding from the Verizon Foundation, the tool, the Verizon Literacy Program Self-Assessment Tool (VLP-SAT), "incorporates the latest scientific research on the effectiveness of literacy programs that serve populations from birth through childhood," according to the NCFL and Thinkfinity. For schools or other organizations that receive a low score using the tool, a list of recommended resources from literacy and education experts is provided, and all are available free of charge at Thinkfinity.org, which is the Verizon Foundation's free, online portal that provides access to more than 55,000 standards- and research-based educational resources. [More— [eSchool News](#)] (Nov. 6)

School Improvement

Eleven big-city school districts voluntarily took part in the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress ([NAEP](#)) Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), and results showed that districts continue to make progress in mathematics, but progress in reading is mixed. The participating districts, which have higher concentrations of low-income and at-risk students, showed comparable to or better performance than that of similar students across the country, according to two reports from [The Nation's Report Card](#). [More—[Associated Press](#)] (Nov. 15)

New York City's public schools received their grades under the latest effort of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein to improve the performance of the city's more than 1,200 schools. Twenty-three percent of the schools scored A's under the "school quality reviews" and will receive extra funding if they agree to be "demonstration sites" for other schools. Slightly more than a third received B's and 25 percent received

C's. The remaining eight and four percent that received D's and F's, respectively, run the risks of having their staffs changed or being closed. Slightly more than 200 schools did not receive grades since more than 150 had not been open long enough for the reviews and the city's 60 charter schools did not conduct school surveys that contributed to the school grades. [More— [Education Week](#)] (Nov. 8) (*paid subscription required*)

Minnesota's South St. Paul school district is planning to be the first district in the U.S. to require all students to enroll in the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma program. The move by the 3,200-student district, according to its director of curriculum and instruction, Ms. Jane Stassen, is to prepare its students for postsecondary education through the "rigorous, challenging academic experiences" that IB offers. More than 225 American schools this year started offering at least one IB program, which brings the total number of schools offering the program to 800. [More— [Education Week](#)] (Oct. 30) (*paid subscription required*)

In a single year, the more than 30 percent of North Carolina students who do not graduate from high school cost the state as much as \$169 million in higher Medicaid and prison costs and reduced tax revenues, according to a new report released by the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation. The report's findings and recommendations, which include the use of taxpayer-funded vouchers to help students pay for private schools, "have drawn a sharp dividing line between supporters and critics of public schools." It also arrives at a time when legislators in North Carolina have formed a committee of business and education leaders to oversee the allocation of \$7 million in dropout prevention grants to local school districts. [More—[The News & Observer](#)] (Oct. 25)

The Philadelphia School District is "going back to the basics" to provide students with teachers and instructional resources in curricular areas that have been neglected or nonexistent in recent years. The district's School Reform Commission announced that school administrators will be developing a new academic agenda for the 2008-09 school year that will place such priorities as reduced class sizes in Grades K-3 and art and music instruction for all students in the "top tier" of next year's budget. According to the Commission's chairwoman, funding for the expanded services will result from a combination of rearrangements in the current budget allocations and new state and city monies. [More— [Philadelphia Daily News](#)] (Oct. 18)

Student Achievement

With help from General Electric Company (GE), Atlanta, Georgia, teachers hope to improve math and science achievement. A \$22 million grant from Connecticut-based GE will be provided over five years and will help to develop curriculum and provide for challenging, hands-on experiences for Atlanta students. Administrators and teachers welcome the help since they are facing challenges such as having only 33 percent of the district's students passing the Georgia End of Course Test in geometry and having a similar low percentage passing the exam in biology. [More—[The Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#)] (Nov. 9)

Twenty-two states now have high-stakes exit exams, and another four are in the process of phasing them in, but some of these efforts are proving to be controversial, with students in some states having sued for additional help when they have failed the gate-keeping tests. Advocates for the exams point to the rising expectations they offer, noting that in 2005, a "record 68 percent of high school graduates nationwide took at least four years of English and three each of math, science, and social studies." [More— [USA TODAY](#)] (Oct. 29)

Maryland, one of the states phasing in high-stakes graduation exams, will continue with its plan to require them for all students, including special education and ELL students, starting with the Class of 2009. The Maryland State Board of Education, however, has determined that students struggling to pass all four required tests will have two alternatives: achieve a high enough combined score on the group of four tests to overcome a failing score on one of them, or complete a project designed by the state department of education and for which a student can earn points that can help to make up a difference in a failing grade on a test. [More—[The Baltimore Sun](#)] (Nov. 1)

A study by the Texas Public Policy Foundation examined scores on several major tests—the TAKS, ACT, SAT and Advanced Placement exams—to identify high schools that have been largely successful in teaching math and science to their students. Common traits include utilizing slightly larger classes, paying teachers in those subjects more money than other teachers, and having a higher percentage of teachers certified in math and science. [More—[Dallas Morning News](#)] (Nov. 1)

"Science House," a new component of the Science Museum of Minnesota, will serve as a "one-stop resource center for K-12 teachers to enrich the quality of science education in classrooms statewide." Funded primarily by 3M, the new resource comes at a time when the state's new science standards are requiring an increase in required science courses to graduate from high school. In its pilot year, the center will work with 17 school districts, offering both curricular resources and a team of staff development specialists with K-12 classroom experience. [More— [Star Tribune \(Minneapolis-St. Paul\)](#)] (Oct. 22)

Teacher Quality and Development

The 10th annual All-USA Teacher Team represents a variety of grade levels, subjects, and populations of students, and this year's group, being honored by *USA Today*, has a "mathematical bent," according to the newspaper. In all instances, however, the 20 teachers, who each receive \$2,500 cash awards to be shared with their schools, "aim high and provide the support to break down even monumental challenges into a pyramid of small successes." [More—[USA Today](#)] (Oct. 18)

Since its inception 10 years ago, the UTeach program at the University of Texas at Austin has doubled the number of math and science teachers it produces annually, with 70 percent of UTeach students still in the classroom five years after they entered the teacher profession, which is 20 percent above the national

average for new teachers. Such success has other universities in Louisiana, California, and elsewhere in the U.S. studying UTeach's approach. With support from the Exxon Mobil Corporation, 10 colleges and universities are expected to begin replicating the UTeach program. [More— [Austin American-Statesman \(Texas\)](#)] (Nov. 5)

Having required all of its teacher-preparation programs to be established anew or to undergo redesign beginning in 2000, the state of Louisiana released the first of its planned annual studies of the programs' effectiveness. This initial report provided data on only three redesigned programs, all of them alternative certification programs, and the results were positive. The evaluation revealed that the more than 150 new teachers produced by the three programs performed at levels that equaled or exceeded the performance of experienced teachers. Louisiana will eventually make the results of the series of annual evaluation studies part of its overall accountability system for teacher education. [More— [Education Week](#)] (Oct. 26) (*premium article access compliments of Edweek.org*)

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