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Editor's Note

The Innovator would like to welcome Jim Shelton, the new Assistant Deputy Secretary of the Office of Innovation and Improvement.

Feature

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: Stimulating the Economy and Advancing Reform

America faces an economic crisis not seen since the Great Depression: the economy is losing half a million jobs a month, consumer credit is frozen, purchasing power is in decline, and, as a result, tax revenues for state and local governments are falling at an alarming rate. With nearly all states required to balance their budgets and with education accounting for the largest component of state government expenditures, budget deficits threaten massive cuts in education funding to local school districts. This is a prescription for long-term economic decline, because we know the countries that out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow.

In February, Congress passed and the President signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) to stimulate job creation by investing billions of dollars in energy, health care, infrastructure, and education. For the education sector, the ARRA's \$100 billion investment will not only have a short term impact by saving and creating jobs, but also will provide an unprecedented long term opportunity to overhaul the nation's education system, improve student achievement and college readiness, and ensure our nation's competitiveness on the global stage.

"We have never had the kind of opportunity we have before us to really dramatically change the quality of education across the country and to make a difference in our lives and [the lives of] our students," remarked Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. He calls the stimulus funding a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to lift American education to a new level—and make us more competitive in the global economy."

ARRA provides billions of dollars to strengthen education through the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF); Title I, Part A of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*; Part B of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*; Pell Grants; Federal Work-Study; and other programs. It also provides support for adults with disabilities through the Vocational Rehabilitation State Grants program and the Independent Living programs authorized under the *Rehabilitation Act*.

Districts generally have up to two years to obligate these funds. While many school districts may need to use a portion of their ARRA funds to save jobs, every district and school should be considering how to use these funds to improve student outcomes over the next two years and to advance reforms that will have even longer-term impact. That's why Secretary Duncan has challenged states and districts to commit to more than perpetuating the status quo with ARRA's support. If that happens, according to Duncan, the nation will miss an historic opportunity to change for the better. So states that accept funding from the ARRA must commit to these four reforms:

- Increase teacher effectiveness and ensure an equitable distribution of qualified teachers;
- Progress towards the implementation of college- and career- ready standards and high-quality

- assessments for all students;
- Turn around the lowest-performing schools; and
- Develop and use of pre-K through post-secondary data systems.



Secretary Arne Duncan announces at Doswell Brooks Elementary School in Capitol Heights, Md., that \$44 billion for states and schools is available under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Improving teacher effectiveness and equitable distribution of highly qualified teachers

Teacher effectiveness is a major influence on students' academic success. Research shows that it may be the most important school-related factor affecting student achievement. Districts and schools can help teachers become more effective by ensuring that they have opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills through continuous improvement, and to receive regular feedback from school leaders and their peers. Among the challenges that states must meet is the establishment of clear metrics that help to evaluate teachers, ones that, at least in part, incorporate measures of student achievement.

New approaches must also be adopted that address the distribution of teachers and ensure that our lowest performing schools are staffed with effective and experienced teachers. One strategy for improving distribution patterns is to provide incentives for new teachers during the recruitment and hiring process. According to Secretary Duncan, "We need people who are passionate, deeply committed, and determined to help their students succeed despite whatever obstacles they might face in the community and even in their own homes." And once they're in place, it will take effective induction, advancement, and compensation strategies to keep them there and supported in their work and professional growth. Among innovative approaches to achieve this assurance are differential pay and the creation of more charter schools.

If states improve their hiring practices and working conditions and provide incentives for teacher placement in hard-to-staff subjects and high-challenge schools, they can help improve the equitable distribution of high quality teachers, and in turn, student outcomes. New reforms in this area may make the teaching profession more attractive, the job conditions more manageable, and pay for high quality teachers significantly better.

Improving standards and assessments to ensure high school graduates are college and career ready

The ARRA encourages states to adopt rigorous standards that are internationally benchmarked. Secretary Duncan has often said, "A nation without true career- and college-ready standards is lying to its children. A nation with low academic standards is telling students and parents that our kids are doing well—when, in fact, they are not."

The stimulus funds directs states and districts to reflect on the current way they are educating students, and to move in new directions that will place more value on the high school diploma by raising the rigor of high school standards, assessments, and curriculum, and aligning expectations with the demands of postsecondary education and careers. Among the opportunities for more rigorous coursework are increased involvement in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and dual-enrollment in postsecondary, credit-bearing courses. In assessing student achievement, teachers can adopt formative and interim

assessments that provide timely data to help them track and improve student progress. To produce more globally competitive students, there is a need for clear standards – and high standards. “If we raise expectations, our students will meet them,” the Secretary has said.

Turning around the lowest-performing schools

Turning around our nation’s lowest performing schools is likely to require significant overhaul of school staff, leadership, and instructional programs, and for the most distressed schools, school closings and consolidation. States must have a plan to hold schools accountable; we can no longer be satisfied when one out of four kids drops out of high school or when half of the students who go to college do not finish within six years.

When Secretary Duncan was superintendent of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), he worked to close schools that were consistently underperforming. In their place, CPS implemented a variety of new learning models: some were traditional union school and others were charter or contract schools. Some of them are succeeding, while others are not. Secretary Duncan and the Department are eager to work in partnership with anyone and everyone who cares about public education – and determined above all – to challenge conventional thinking and aim higher.

Establishing data systems and using data for improvement

At the heart of improving schools and school districts are systems to gather, analyze, and act on data about student performance, teacher performance and the elements that contribute to both. States, districts, and schools need to be honest about what is working and what is broken. Secretary Duncan has said, “We’re telling our children they are meeting state standards, but they are absolutely ill-equipped, not just to graduate from high school, but to go to college. I think we do children and families a great disservice when we do that. We must be transparent and can talk about the good, the bad, and the ugly.”

In exchange for ARRA funds, states must establish pre-K-to-college and career data systems that track progress and foster continuous improvement. The intention is to move from collecting data for compliance to using data for improvement. They must show that they can gather information to improve student learning, teacher performance, and college and career-readiness through enhanced data systems that track progress. In addition, states will report on the status of their charter schools, including the number operating and those that have closed in the past three years because of academic problems. If schools can show how they are performing, they can address the areas of weakness and begin to improve because it will drive conversations and actions.

Ready, set, innovate

As part of the stimulus package there is a set of competitive grants available to those states and districts that make the most progress. The \$4.35 billion dollar “Race to the Top” fund will incent states that have implemented the most creative and aggressive reforms. A separate “Investing in What Works and Innovation” fund of \$650 million will be awarded to districts and non-profit groups that have made significant gains in closing achievement gaps to serve as models for best practices. Application guidelines for both programs are expected to be released in June. Two rounds of funding are anticipated: the first in the late fall of this year, the second in summer 2010.

Secretary Duncan and President Obama have been very clear about their priorities for education. The President said, “If there is a good idea, let’s try it. If it works, let’s expand it. If it doesn’t, let’s drop it.”

The impact of the stimulus funds on education is yet to be known, but ARRA funds provide an impetus for doing things dramatically better for the children of the 21st century and beyond.

Resources

- [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009: Using ARRA Funds to Drive School Reform and Improvement](#)
- [Ed.gov Blog](#)
- [Education Department: American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009](#)

What's New ?

From the U.S. Department of Education

Secretary Duncan [released](#) a statement about flu and its impact on schools. ED is coordinating with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, health experts and agencies across the federal government to ensure that, in the case of a flu outbreak, critical operations and services will continue. Visit ED's [page on emergency flu planning](#) for more information. (April 29)

A number of states have applied for and been granted funds under ARRA. The funding will lay the foundation for a generation of education reform and help save hundreds of thousands of teaching jobs at risk of state and local budget cuts. In order to receive funds, states provided assurances that they will collect, publish, analyze and act on basic information regarding the quality of classroom teachers, annual student improvements, college readiness, the effectiveness of state standards and assessments, progress on removing charter caps, and interventions in turning around underperforming schools. Click [here](#) to view the applications. (April 2009)

On April 1, at Doswell E. Brooks Elementary School in suburban Maryland, Secretary Duncan [announced](#) the availability of \$44 billion from the ARRA. "Given our economic circumstances, it's critical that money go out quickly, but it's even more important that it be spent wisely," he said. Fact sheets and guidance on specific programs are available at <http://www.ed.gov/recovery/index.html> (April 1)

Secretary Duncan also [announced](#) on April 13th that \$108.8 million in funding for targeted students and communities is now available to states under the ARRA. The latest funds include \$39.6 million in 180 Impact Aid construction grants for communities with military bases, Indian reservations, and other federal properties that do not generate local tax revenues. Another \$69.2 million in 52 Homeless Children and Youth grants will help states and school districts meet the educational and related needs of homeless students. (April 13)

The new [ED.gov blog](#) features news about the ARRA as well as entries describing Secretary Duncan's recent speeches, interviews, and school visits. Recent posts include an ARRA briefing for education associations (webcast), Duncan's call for "a new era of science education in America," his, "Educating Our Way to a Better Economy" op-ed in the Dallas Morning News, awards and recognition from the Washington Post and Rolling Stone, a video of a community whose schools will be helped considerably by the ARRA, and Duncan's personal appeal to ED staff and others to volunteer to tutor children.

The most recent edition of "Education News Parents Can Use" ([broadcast](#) live on April 21st) continued the discussion from the March show by highlighting the ARRA, its potential to save and create hundreds of thousands of jobs, and, critically, its promise for generating urgently needed reform in schools across the country. In addition to the reforms promised by states in return for the bulk of the stimulus funds, the law reserves \$5 billion for the Secretary to invest, which includes a \$4.35 billion "Race to the Top" fund for states moving forward with bold programs to improve student achievement, and a \$650 million "Invest in What Works and Innovation" fund for districts and non-profit organizations with strong track records of improving student achievement. Applications for these competitive programs will be posted this spring. For more information about the show, go to <http://www.ed.gov/edtv/>. (You can watch the archived webcasts at <http://www.connectlive.com/events/ednews/>.) (April 21)



The Institute of Education Sciences has [awarded](#) grants to 27 state education agencies for the design and implementation of statewide longitudinal data systems. The multi-year value of individual state grants ranges from \$2.5 million to \$9 million for projects that will run for three to five years. The full, multi-year value of the combined grants is \$150 million. The competition for these grants was held last fall. (April 2009)

From the Office of Innovation and Improvement

Four of the U.S. Department of Education's Classroom Teaching Ambassadors from Maine, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts have [launched](#) a new effort called the [New England Regional Teacher Leadership Initiative](#) to help teachers have a voice in education policy development. The teacher ambassadors, with the support of the Department's Office of Innovation and Improvement and its Region I Office, held a one-day conference on April 4, 2009 in Boston. The mission of the New England Regional Teacher Leader Initiative is to empower teachers to make positive change in education policy. (April 6)

The [State Charter School Facilities Incentive Grants](#) program is now accepting applications through July 1, 2009. The purpose of the program is to help states establish, enhance, and administer per-pupil facilities aid programs for charter schools. Eligible states are those with per-pupil aid programs to assist charter schools with their school facility costs. (April 2009)

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

[The Education Trust](#) recently unveiled the first in a series of 52 state-by-state [reports](#) that aim to track how federal economic stimulus funds are impacting student achievement and overall improvement in education. The reports will include indicators of academic performance and educational attainment and opportunity. (April 2009)

More than 30 diverse education, business, civil rights, and philanthropic organizations have joined together to urge federal, state, and local leaders to ensure that the ARRA provides not only just a short-term economic boost, but also achieves long-term gains in student achievement. In its letter of April 16, 2009, to Education Secretary Arne Duncan, the new [Coalition for Student Achievement](#) said that while it appreciates “the speed and efficiency by which the Department is delivering these much-needed funds, that speed and efficiency must not trump reform and improvement.” (April 16)

[Project Tomorrow](#) has released selected national findings from the “Speak Up National Research Project,” which sponsors the annual Speak Up survey. This year’s survey represents the ideas of more than 281,000 students in kindergarten through 12th grade from schools across the U.S. The ideas presented in “Speak Up 2008” offer an insight into how students believe that the economic stimulus funds should be used in their schools. (March 24)

Arts in Education

Americans for the Arts is hosting a live [“webinar”](#) on May 19 from 4:00 until 5:30 p.m., EDT, focusing on how the arts can help build parental involvement in schools. Discussants will highlight research that demonstrates how the arts can engage families in education in addition to strategies that are working in various types of schools. The cost to tune in to the live session is \$85 for members of the organization, and \$125 for non-members. (April 2009)

The [National Endowment for the Arts](#) is hosting an “Education Leaders Institute” on June 14-17 in Chicago. The five state delegations in attendance—Alabama (team lead: Alabama State Council on the Arts); Indiana (team lead: Indiana Arts Commission); Maine (team lead: Maine Arts Commission); New Mexico (team lead: New Mexico Arts); and Utah (team lead: Utah Arts Council)—are charged with developing coordinated state arts education plans. (April 2009)

The Washington, D.C.-based Arts Education Partnership (AEP) has launched a newsletter that it hopes will be easier to use, access, and share than its previous listserv announcements. Along with the new format comes a new submission policy. You may read about it on the AEP [Web site](#). (March 10)

Charter Schools/Choice

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute has released a series of essays from experts on school choice in a [report](#) called *When Public Schools Take Private Dollars: What's the Place of Accountability in School Voucher Programs?* (March 2009)

Charter schools, on average, do not appear to be skimming the best students from public school districts and are not more racially segregated than their traditional public school counterparts, according to a [study](#) by the [RAND Corporation](#). It is the first to use longitudinal, student-level data to examine charter school outcomes across multiple communities in states with varied charter school laws. In two locations (Chicago and Florida) researchers found that charter high schools increase the probability that students will graduate by seven to 15 percentage points and increase the probability that students will enroll in college by eight to 10 percentage points. (March 18)

Closing the Achievement Gap

Five urban school districts have been identified as finalists for the prestigious [Broad Prize for Urban Education](#): the Aldine Independent School District, near Houston, Texas; Broward County Public Schools in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; Gwinnett County Public Schools in Ga.; Long Beach Unified School District in Calif.; and the Socorro Independent School District in El Paso, Texas. The award honors schools that have made significant progress in reducing the achievement gap, especially among disadvantaged students. The winner receives \$1 million for college scholarships. (April 2009)

The student population in the country's suburban schools has increased by 3.4 million in the last decade-and-a-half, and virtually all of that growth is due to the influx of Latino, black, and Asian students. A Pew Hispanic Center [report](#) finds that white students, who once made up three-quarters of enrollment, now account for 59 percent of the student population in suburban districts. The data also show that while districts outside urban and rural areas have seen gains in minority students, schools within some of those districts have become more segregated. (March 31)

The Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University offers a [Web site](#) called "The Graduation Gap," which aims to be a resource for all individuals interested in improving the nation's high schools. The site includes data on the size, scope, and characteristics of the "graduation gap." A new [issue brief](#) asserts that between 2002 and 2006, a dozen states made significant progress in reducing their percentages of high school dropouts. (March 2009)

Early Education

A new [report](#) from the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University reveals that the recession may be stalling the expansion of state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, although the general quality of these programs is improving. Nine states—Alabama, California, Connecticut, Florida, Iowa, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, and South Carolina—have announced cuts to state pre-kindergarten programs. At President Obama's request, however, Congress has significantly raised federal financing for early education. (April 8)

Education Reform

The [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#), the [National Association of Manufacturers](#), and the [National Education Association](#) recently joined forces to promote the work of the [New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce](#), which is calling for significant changes in education funding, assessment, school management, teacher pay, and professional development. The participating groups hope the partnership will spur action in taking the proposals presented in the 2006 Tough Choices or Tough Times report from ideas to practice. (March 2009)

According to a [survey](#) from the [Instructional Technology Council](#), community colleges are continuing to see increases in their distance education enrollments. The survey found that from 2006 to 2007, enrollment in

distance learning programs grew 11.3 percent. Last year, the survey found an increase of 18 percent over the previous year. (April 2009)

Raising Student Achievement

Researchers Michael Gurian, Kathy Stevens, and Peggy Daniels explore the benefits of single-sex education in a report entitled, “Successful Single-Sex Classrooms: A Practical Guide to Teaching Boys & Girls Separately.” The guide is designed for administrators and teachers, but could also be useful for parents. It includes guidelines for switching a school from co-ed to single-sex, getting parents to support the new single-gender set up, and advertising strategies to attract students. The guide may be purchased [online](#). (2009)

Teacher Quality and Development

The Spring 2009 issue of the [Teacher Professional Development Sourcebook](#) from Education Week explores how teachers and their schools can create effective and innovative staff-development programs even when tough economic times translate into reduced budgets for these services. (April 2009)

Over the next four years, more than one-third of the 3.2 million teachers across the country could retire, according to a [report](#) from the [National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future](#). In Learning Teams: Creating What’s Next, the authors assert that policymakers should restructure schools and revamp state retirement practices so that effective, veteran teachers can mentor new instructors. (April 2009)

Technology

This year’s Technology Counts [report](#) from Education Week is entitled, “Breaking Away From Tradition: E-Education Expands Opportunities for Raising Achievement,” and looks at why e-learning is an important component of re-tooling how instruction is delivered in classrooms. The report includes articles on e-education research, Advanced Placement programming, quality online learning materials, and teacher training. (March 25) *(More articles from the report appear in the news section below.)*

Innovations in the News

Raising Student Achievement

State education leaders in Massachusetts will begin tracking individual students’ performance from one grade to the next beginning this fall. Presently, a school’s success in the state is determined by comparing its state assessment scores for a particular grade level to the scores of the same grade from the previous years. The state’s new “growth” model is based on one in Colorado, developed by the National Center for Assessment. [More— The [Boston Globe](#)] (March 24)

Researchers from Arizona State University (ASU) and the University of Colorado at Boulder point to seven out-of-school factors influencing students’ academic achievements. Among them are prenatal care, health care, environmental pollutants, family stresses, extended learning opportunities, and neighborhood conditions. “As wonderful as some teachers and schools are,” contends David C. Berliner, professor of education leadership and policy studies at ASU and one of the report’s authors, “most cannot eliminate inequalities that have their roots outside of their doors.” The report recommends provision of high-quality preschools for all children along with summer learning for disadvantaged students. [More—[Education Week](#)] (March 10) (paid subscription required)

Computer-assisted instruction “has the potential to significantly enhance student mathematics achievement in middle and high school,” according to a new study from the February issue of the American Economic Journal: Economic Policy. The results were based on a randomized study of more than 3,000 late-middle and early high school students in three urban school districts, some of who were taught using technology and others without it. The improvements recorded for those using the technology were “especially strong for students in large classes and those with high absentee rates.” According to researchers, the findings point to the potential for computer-aided instruction to be more cost-effective than class-size-reduction efforts. [More—[Education Week](#)] (March 10) (paid subscription required)

Reading

Volunteers from Experience Corps (EC), a tutoring program serving more than 20,000 students nationwide, helps students to make progress in critical reading skills, and does so more effectively than for similar students not in the EC program, according to a two-year study by researchers from Washington University in St. Louis. The favorable results that students in the EC program experienced were the same across the variables of gender, grade level, and classroom behavior. The study involved 800 students from 23 schools in three cities. The EC approach involves use of volunteer reading coaches who work with students in 40-minute, one-on-one sessions. [More—The [Christian Science Monitor](#)] (April 9)

Findings from a new study that examines the possible connections between music experiences and increased abilities in non-music domains, specifically between music instruction and reading skills in young children, points to increases in vocabulary and verbal sequencing for students who received musical instruction. Reported in the most recent issue of the journal *Psychology of Music*, researchers from Long Island University used a quasi-experimental design to compare similar students in two New York City Schools, one group receiving musical instruction from kindergarten through second grade and a control group without musical instruction. Researchers determined that the students with the music-rich curriculum scored significantly higher than the control group students on the literacy tests. [More—[Miller-McCune](#)] (March 2009)

School Improvement

In an effort to better quantify and understand the challenges it faces, the Newark school district has entered into a research partnership with Rutgers University. The Newark Schools Research Collaborative is modeled on a 20-year relationship between the University of Chicago and the Chicago Public Schools, and is supported by the Victoria Foundation. One of the new collaborative's first priorities is to build a database "warehouse" that will enable a range of research efforts, and which will potentially dovetail with NJ SMART, a statewide data gathering system of the New Jersey Department of Education. The Newark effort will also involve the district's charter schools. [More—New Jersey's [Star-Ledger](#)] (April 9)

It's 4,3,2,1, not A, B, C, D, for growing numbers of students' report cards as schools and districts nationwide move to standards-based reports cards. Districts such as Pelham, New York, now favor reports that use numbers to indicate how students fare on dozens of specific skills, which gives a score of 1 to indicate when the student has not met the state's academic standards, and a 4 for "meeting standards with distinction." While teachers reportedly favor the new approach for "setting clear expectations," some parents in Pelham find the numbers confusing. Among the complaints are the fact that since the new grades are based on year-end expectations, "4s are generally not available until the final marking period." [More—[New York Times](#)] (March 25) (free registration required)

In Kentucky, lawmakers decided to overhaul the state's K-12 assessment system, starting with creating a new set of internationally benchmarked standards and with an eye toward inclusion of 21st-century skills. Other states, including Texas and Washington State, are also considering major changes to statewide assessment systems. Kentucky's new system will narrow the subjects to be tested, eliminate a current writing portfolio, and add a norm-referenced test to "give parents and policymakers a measure of how individual students are performing against the national average." The new assessment system will be in use by the 2011-12 school year. [More—The [Education Week](#)] (March 24) (paid subscription required)

The Teacher Advancement Program (TAP), in use in more than 200 schools, is more than a model for performance pay, even though that element of its approach often gets the public's attention. The TAP sites are increasing nationwide and the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, which provides support to TAP schools, has undertaken several studies of the program's effectiveness. [More—[Education Week](#)] (March 30) [See this month's Innovator feature for more about TAP.] (paid subscription required)

While research to determine what routes to teaching produce the best results, some elements of teaching training appear to be important, such as a, "focus on classroom work that provides meaningful experience and has good oversight," and a, "substantial amount of university course work in subjects they'll be teaching." A recent study of teacher effectiveness in New York City revealed that different teacher-preparation programs have success by attracting different pools of teachers. According to one of the study's authors, Stanford education professor Pam Grossman, "Teach for America does minimal preparation but they bank on selection. Traditional programs are not particularly selective, but they bank on preparation." [More—The [Christian Science Monitor](#)] (March 27)

An approach to alternative teacher preparation in several large cities is the urban teacher residency, which appears to be having success at finding teachers who want to serve in the highest-need schools and tend to stay there for many years. In Chicago, the Academy of Urban School Leadership (AUSL) oversees "residents" who spend a year in Chicago classrooms, supported by mentor-teachers as well as gaining relevant education course work at local universities. New AUSL teachers make a four-year commitment, but the program reports that more than 80 percent of its graduates continue to teach in Chicago classrooms. [More—The [Christian Science Monitor](#)] (March 27)

As increasing numbers of teacher-candidates and persons changing careers to enter teaching look to the flexibility of the Internet for their preparation, online programs of both traditional teachers' colleges and schools devoted solely to online preparation, such as Walden University, continue to grow in popularity and respect from the education field. At Walden, preparation for Minnesota licensure in early-childhood and special education has been added to its degree programs by combining a 14-week field experience in a local school with online experiences that include comparing their experiences with other teacher-candidates. Western Governors University, which uses a competency-based online system for teacher preparation, is the first online school to earn NCATE accreditation. [More—[Education Week](#)] (March 26) (paid subscription required)

Pay-for-performance systems in school districts such as Denver, which just recently revamped its ProComp system, continue to look for the answers to such questions as how much to reward groups of teachers as opposed to individual efforts, or whether salary increases are preferable to annual bonuses. ProComp, the longest-running large-district performance-pay system nationally, has revised upward the amounts going to new teachers in an effort to avoid turnover, and has increased the amount of group incentives. "We learned that when [raising] student performance is so difficult to do," said Brad Jupp, academic policy advisor for the Denver schools who helped to create ProComp, "lowering the stakes for individual incentives and raising the stakes for whole-faculty incentives makes sense." [More—The [Christian Science Monitor](#)] (March 18)

In Denver's neighboring district, Jefferson County, school leaders plan to create a performance-pay system that would reward not just teachers, but also counselors, librarians, and therapists. Jefferson County school administrators and local teacher-union leaders want to start the new plan on a pilot basis next year. While performance-pay systems are already in place in Denver and two other counties in Colorado, Jefferson County is the state's largest district, which causes its superintendent, Cindy Stevenson, to think that it could be the "tipping point" for performance pay throughout the state. [More—The [Denver Post](#)] (March 15)

Technology in Education

The potential links between video games and classroom learning are not very well defined, but SMALLab, a project involving researchers at Arizona State University (ASU) and Coronado High School in Scottsdale, is exploring how to increase students' understanding of academic concepts using an interactive device that features a 15-by-15-foot mat and accompanying digital equipment that provide real-time audio and visual feedback to students. A key to SMALLab's success, according to ASU researchers, is developing the curriculum in conjunction with the technology and involving teachers as partners in the design of the lesson plans. [More—[Education Week](#)] (April 7) (paid subscription required)

Personal response systems, better known as "clickers," that have been widely used in university classrooms for a decade, are increasingly prevalent in K-12 classrooms. The hand-held devices, which record individual responses to questions and transmit them to a teacher's computer, are seen by some educators as an efficient way to record data on individual students. However, educators and researchers caution against use of clickers as only a gimmick and some technology experts caution against their use in small classrooms, where an old fashioned, show-of-hands approach might be the best means of getting feedback. [More—[The Boston Globe](#)] (April 3)

According to the latest Sloan Consortium report on online education, the number of K-12 students using online courses increased to more than one million students in 2007-08, a nearly 50 percent increase since 2005-06. Accompanying that increase are more diverse and creative versions of online learning beyond the traditional distance-learning model. Blended learning environments, in which digital curriculum is combined with in-class instruction, allows teachers to meet below-grade-level students, "where they are and build the skills so they can advance," according to Todd Yarch, principal of Chicago's VOISE – Virtual Opportunities Inside a School Environment – Academy High School. [More—[Education Week](#)] (March 26) (paid subscription required)

Another area of online learning growth is in Advanced Placement course taking, increasing from approximately 13 percent of 17,000 schools offering online versions of AP courses three years ago to 17 percent today. The growth, according to the College Board's Trevor Packer, is fueled by "educators...seeking ways to help a greater diversity of students prepare for the rigors of college and to graduate in four years." Despite the recent increases, there are skeptics of the effectiveness of virtual AP courses that rely solely on a virtual teacher, since students can struggle without a teacher to monitor their progress. That can be guarded against, however, according to online AP teacher Dianna Miller of the Florida Virtual School, by the use of phone tutoring sessions and use of instant messaging and e-mail. [More—[Education Week](#)] (March 26) (paid subscription required)

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.

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