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Moving Mountains: Chartering to Improve Student Achievement

Inside the ballroom, educators waited to hear their names called and to walk across the stage. A slideshow projected on a screen highlighted pictures of vibrant classrooms and smiling children. Principal Wanda Mallard could not help but feel as though she was participating in a graduation ceremony as she joined her colleagues from across the nation in Washington, D.C., last November for the *No Child Left Behind* Blue Ribbon Schools recognition banquet. For Mallard, and the community supporting International Studies Elementary Charter School (ISECS) in Albany, Ga., the Blue Ribbon Schools award plaque, much like a diploma, symbolized great achievement as well as a rite of passage. In 2007, ISECS earned the Blue Ribbon Schools award – the highest honor that the federal government bestows on schools – for dramatically improving student performance. ISECS' journey to become a high-performing school of choice was long and uncommon, fueled by one community's unique needs and persistent hope for children.



Wanda Mallard, ISECS principal; Desiree Jackson, ISECS teacher/math coach; and Laytona Stephenson, IB/PYP coordinator, pose with U.S. Deputy Secretary Raymond Simon at the Blue Ribbon School ceremony.

In her retirement, Mallard proudly looks back at ISECS' progress. The school now is headed by Zeda George, who has led other schools in the Dougherty County School System (DCSS). With George at the helm, ISECS continues to demonstrate the levels of achievement that earned it recognition as a Blue Ribbon School last year. On the most recent state achievement tests, 84 percent of fifth-grade students met proficiency targets in mathematics and 98 percent met those targets in reading. Every student reached proficiency in language arts.

Today, ISECS serves 455 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Students are 84 percent black, eight percent Hispanic, seven percent white, and less than one percent American Indian or Asian/Pacific Islander, respectively, and 66 percent of the population qualifies for the federal free or reduced price meal program.

It wasn't always this way. ISECS traces its history to 1965, when it was established as Mock Road Elementary, a traditional public school in southwest Georgia. The school was created to serve a large population of students from military families who were stationed at the adjacent Albany Marine Corps Logistics Base. For decades, the school was one of the lowest-performing in the district.

In 1994, a tropical storm hit the area, causing the worst flooding in Albany's history. Mock Road Elementary was one of many schools that sustained damage, and 22,000 people in the city were displaced. Four years

later, Albany experienced another flood. As a result, the population around the school considerably decreased. By 2000, the local Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Committee began considering the future of the Marine Corps base. Suddenly, the existence of Mock Road Elementary was in question.

A Community Acts to Save its School

Peggy Nielson, Albany's representative on the state board of education and member of the BRAC Committee, recognized that the quality of local schools could determine the Marines' long-term commitment to the area. With help from Mallard and representatives from the base, Nielson organized focus groups comprised of parents, community members, and teachers. The groups aimed to determine how Mock Road Elementary could improve performance and better serve families, particularly those stationed at the Marine Corps base. Nielson remembers, "We wanted to mine the wisdom of our customers. If you can compare education to a business, we wanted the input of our 'customers' in order to create the best 'product,' which is excellence for our students."

Out of these discussions came the idea to tailor the school's curriculum to its population. The district's military children, many of whom had exposure to various cultures and an international education through tours of duty with their parents, needed a seamless transition to learning in DCSS. To aid in this transition and provide families with a choice for their children's education, the focus groups selected the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme as the structure for the new curriculum.

School faculty spent a year researching the IB methodology. In 2004, they voted to implement the program, citing its strong international dimension and focus on rigorous academics, skills development, and study across a broad range of subjects. In 2004, Mock Road Elementary reopened as the International Studies Elementary Magnet School (ISEMS), but its journey toward success was not complete.

A Traditional Public School Experiments with Two Choice Models

Although the transition from a traditional public school to a magnet program offered ISEMS more freedom, much work had to be done to impact performance. To explore other options for improvement, Mallard and her faculty began talking about reconstituting ISEMS as a charter school.

Nationally, charter schools have demonstrated that they can be better positioned to innovate and excel than traditional public schools. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), children who attend schools that are identified as needing improvement may choose to attend charter schools in their district. Charters offer choices for schools, too. Under the law, schools that have not met adequate yearly progress for four consecutive years may face corrective action and restructuring. Reconfiguration as a charter school is one option that many schools may find effective for turning around performance.

Charter schools are exempt from many state and local regulatory requirements and have greater control over budgets and personnel decisions. These freedoms come with added accountability, but studies show that charters are demonstrating success. In 2004, for example, researcher Caroline Hoxby [found](#) that, nationwide, 10 percent more charter school students reached proficiency on state reading and mathematics exams than traditional public school students.

The flexibility to overhaul ISEMS was what Mallard and others in the community believed could be the catalyst for marked improvement. A team was formed to gather research on charter schools and to learn how to write a charter petition. The team consisted of Mallard and her vice principal, the IB and curriculum coordinators, a literacy coach, teachers, parents, and community members. To gauge how families felt about another transition, surveys were distributed and meetings were held with representatives from DCSS and the Georgia Department of Education. DCSS Superintendent Sally Whatley saw benefits from the proposed curriculum that had the potential to reach beyond the lines of traditional school zones and impact the entire system. Nielson recalls that the district had little experience with charters, but that Superintendent Whatley, DCSS Board of Education Chairman Michael Windom, and ISEMS' administration were "willing vessels." She notes, "They opened themselves up to something new and said, 'Show us if chartering can improve this school.'"

After the team conducted site visits to other charter schools and interpreted results from surveys and meetings, ISEMS' faculty voted to transition to a charter model. Because the hallmark of most charter schools is a tailored program to the communities they serve, ISEMS included school and district staff and parent and community members in the review of its charter. Andrew Broy, director of the charter schools division for the Georgia Department of Education, notes, "The lesson that educators can learn from [this school] is that chartering is something they can grasp on their own. The principal and teachers at ISEMS didn't view chartering as forced on them by an outside entity. ... They didn't view it as an onerous requirement. They chose it, and it's working."

At the Core of the Turnaround: A Mission-Driven Focus and Support for Teachers

As part of the reconstitution, teachers at the new International Studies Elementary Charter School (ISECS) were asked to reapply for their positions. Although the majority of teachers were reinstated, Mallard recalls that attitudes changed. "When I interviewed original staff and new applicants, I told them it would not be 'business as usual' at ISECS. It was a different school. We'd be driven by our new mission to develop high academic skills, an understanding of international ideas, responsible citizenship, and critical thinking in our students. I told them we were going to succeed."

When ISECS opened in 2005, the majority of startup funds were used to train staff in the IB methodology. Mallard felt strongly that every teacher should receive hands-on training, so Nielson worked for eight months to obtain additional state funds. ISECS educators observed IB pedagogical theory in action from Atlanta to South Carolina, to Canada. Trainers from around the world came to ISECS to share promising practices.

The investment in staff development paid off in 2006, as the Swiss-based IB Organization authorized ISECS to sponsor the Primary Years Programme, and educators from across the country are now visiting the school to learn effective instructional strategies.

For Every Learner, Success; For Every Parent, Involvement

Despite the fact that the majority of students come to the school with challenges stemming from low-income and traditionally underserved backgrounds, ISECS teachers believe that every student can learn. Based on the IB framework, students are expected to think critically and creatively, act with integrity, appreciate others' cultures and their history, and develop their natural curiosity to become independent learners.

Students develop these aspects of the IB "Learner Profile" through units of study in each subject area. From mathematics to art, units are organized based on six themes: *Who We Are*; *Where We Are in Place and Time*; *How We Express Ourselves*; *How the World Works*; *How We Organize Ourselves*; and *How We Share the Planet*. Mallard notes these inquiry-based themes engage students and have given ISECS' curriculum a logical structure. For added depth, the school requires that every student develop a portfolio of work or cross-disciplinary project that demonstrates mastery of studied concepts. Every student also must learn Spanish.

Just as students understand expectations, parents know they have requirements to meet. Every year, parents must contribute a minimum of 18 volunteer hours. As a result, the school has a family-oriented atmosphere. Parents can be found participating on the charter board, organizing fundraisers, or assisting in the high-tech literacy center.

DCSS Board of Education Chairman Windom states, "Watching ISECS transform itself through the hard work of parents, students, the community, and educators has been fulfilling. They made changes, they chose to improve, and they did it." In 2005 and 2006, the school was recognized by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement and the state department of education for the greatest gains in meeting and exceeding standards. Last year, ISECS was honored as a Title I Distinguished School.

A "Do-It Ourselves" Attitude Goes a Long Way

Nearly 2,000 miles to the west of Albany, founders of a charter school in Phoenix, Ariz., adopted a similar "do it ourselves" attitude to increase student achievement. Like ISECS, the Pan-American Elementary Charter School (PAES) overcame a difficult beginning to flourish as a school that caters to the needs of its

population.

Educators Marta and Luis Pasos created PAES as a place where low-income Hispanic students could come to excel. PAES received its charter in 2001. Due to postponed building inspections and delayed state funding, many families gave up on enrolling during the inaugural year. Consequently, the school had to lay off teachers. In order to keep the fledgling school alive, the founders took out personal loans.

Despite this troubled start, PAES more than doubled its population by the end of the first year and, by the second year, it had enough funds to pay off the founders' debts and rehire teachers. Mrs. Pasos attributes this turnaround to "doing everything we can ourselves." Indeed, education at PAES is a family affair. The duo handles operating procedures, such as maintenance and payroll. Mr. Pasos even provides transportation by driving a bus. The Pasos' son recently became assistant principal.

Like ISECS, the Phoenix school considered its student population when developing its curriculum. According to Mrs. Pasos, the vast majority of students enter PAES achieving below grade level. An accelerated, full-day kindergarten program allows teachers to cover state standards in half a year and advance to first-grade standards by the latter half of the year. As a result, from the moment they enter, PAES students are on an accelerated track to achievement.

PAES serves 325 students in kindergarten through eighth grade, nearly all of whom are Hispanic and qualify for free or reduced price meals. On the 2007 state exam, 78 percent of students reached proficiency in reading, 89 percent reached that target in mathematics, and all students reached proficiency in writing.

Chartering Enables Gains, Spurs Innovation

Although thousands of miles apart, administrators at PAES and ISECS agree that their success can be attributed to the flexibilities their charters allow. Mrs. Pasos states that by tailoring the curriculum and knowing the people she serves, she can "better meet their needs." DCSS was so impressed with ISECS' results that Dougherty Middle and High Schools are converting to international studies charter schools. ISECS will serve as the feeder for these new schools of choice.

When Wanda Mallard reflects on Mock Road Elementary School's seemingly insurmountable challenges and ISECS' subsequent successes – particularly as a *No Child Left Behind* Blue Ribbon honoree – a verse from Dr. Seuss, one of her students' favorite authors, comes to mind. "Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting. So ... get on your way." Certainly, educators at the two charter schools in Albany and Phoenix will continue the legacy of moving mountains that get in the way of student achievement.

Key Resources

- [Charter School Program](#)
- [Innovations in Education, K-8 Charter Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap](#)
- [Charter High Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap](#)
- [No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon Schools Program](#)

What's New ?

From the U.S. Department of Education

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings [announced](#) that Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, and Virginia have been approved to participate in a supplemental educational services (SES) pilot for the 2008-2009 academic year, allowing some or all districts in these states to offer SES to eligible students in Title I schools in year one of improvement status. (Aug. 4)

While Secretary Spellings congratulated Congress on the reauthorization of the *Higher Education Act*, she also [stated](#), "While the legislation takes some positive steps forward, it fails to create the necessary reforms in accessibility and affordability, and it falls short on strengthening accountability. More work can – and must – be done..." (July 31)

Twenty institutions in 15 states will share \$2.4 million in grants over the next five years to improve special education teacher preparation programs. The awards [announced](#) by the U.S. Department of Education also are meant to ensure that graduates meet the highly qualified teacher requirements of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. (July 29)

Secretary Spellings recently learned how mathematics may be used to putt a golf ball when Phil Mickelson, the number-two-ranked professional golfer in the world, [visited](#) the Department to emphasize the value of mathematics and science. Local students from the Washington, D.C., area participated in the lesson. (July 22)

Citing the need to communicate in languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Korean, and Hindi, Secretary Spellings [announced](#) \$2.2 million in grants to school districts in seven states to help increase the number of Americans learning foreign languages that are critical to national security and commerce. (July 22)

Libraries in 59 low-income school districts will benefit from \$18.2 million in grants, Secretary Spellings [announced](#). The grants aim to improve students' literacy by increasing their access to up-to-date and technologically advanced school library materials. (July 18)

[New](#) grants will fund collaborative efforts between colleges and universities in the United States and Europe. Funds will be used to develop programs of study in a wide range of academic and professional disciplines and to encourage student exchanges. (July 18)

Secretary Spellings [announced](#) the approval of six states – Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, and Ohio – to use a differentiated accountability pilot. The pilot is aimed at helping states differentiate between underperforming schools in need of dramatic interventions and those that are closer to meeting NCLB's goals. (July 1)

A new [report](#) from the National Center for Education Statistics draws data from a survey that was designed to provide policymakers, researchers, and educators with information about technology-based distance education courses in public elementary and secondary schools nationwide. Findings indicate that, during 2004-2005, 37 percent of public school districts and 10 percent of all public schools nationwide had students enrolled in technology-based distance education courses. (June 27)

Charter Schools

Results from four studies show black students in public charter schools are outperforming their counterparts in traditional public schools on standardized tests. These studies are summarized in a new [report](#) from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, *The Color of Success: Black Student Achievement in Public Charter Schools*. (Aug. 4)

Three education reform leaders were [inducted](#) into the National Public Charter Schools Hall of Fame during the National Charter School Conference in New Orleans, La. The recipients were Linda Brown, founder and executive director of Building Excellent Schools; Yvonne Chan, principal of Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in Pacoima, Calif.; and former state Senator Ember Reichgott Junge of Minneapolis, Minn. Also during the conference, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement Doug Mesecar delivered remarks and announced the creation of a National Charter School Achievement Award to recognize high-performing charters that are dramatically improving student achievement. (June 3)

Many training programs aimed at helping charter school principals prepare for their jobs address issues including accountability and labor relations and incorporate hands-on components such as field experiences. According to a new [report](#) from the National Charter School Research Project, these programs may not prepare principals well in other areas such as raising and managing funds and communicating effectively with parents and the public. (June 2008)

Closing the Achievement Gap

An [analysis](#) of standardized test scores published in the July issue of *Science*, the magazine of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, reveals that girls are performing on par with boys in mathematics. The perception that boys do better in the subject tends to endure nonetheless, researchers say, which may discourage some girls from pursuing mathematics-related careers. (July 2008)

Early Childhood

Low-income and minority children could benefit most from preschool, but a new [report](#) finds that these children are the least likely to be enrolled in high-quality programs. In a report released by the RAND California Preschool Study, researchers estimate that only 15 percent of children who could benefit most are in programs that could prepare them for later success in school. (June 18)

Leadership

A [report](#) from the American Association of School Administrators shows that there are not enough candidates to fill a looming number of vacancies in superintendent positions across the country. The report contains new data that profile the condition of the school superintendent pipeline; information regarding incentives and barriers for becoming a superintendent; and steps to ensure that there is a high-quality pool of candidates in the future. (June 2)

Raising Student Achievement

A first-of-its-kind "[21st Century Skills Map](#)" has been developed by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and the National Council for the Social Studies. The map provides educators with concrete examples of how 21st century skills can be integrated into daily classroom activities and highlights how these skills correlate with social studies. The map provides lessons that combine skills like critical thinking and creativity with interdisciplinary themes like civics and global literacy. (July 17)

The National Governors Association's (NGA) 2008 [progress report](#) finds that only 16 states calculate and publicly report a graduation rate consistent with the formula agreed to in the *Graduation Counts Compact*. In April, Secretary Spellings proposed [regulations](#) to NCLB that would ensure all states use the same formula to calculate graduation rates. The proposed regulations mention the NGA formula as a model. (July 2008)

In 2005, 15 prominent business groups warned that a lack of expert workers and teachers posed a threat to U.S. competitiveness. The action plan asserted that by 2015, the U.S. would need 400,000 new graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The group's [updated report](#) reveals that the number of degrees in those fields rose slightly in the earlier part of 2000, but has since flattened out at around 225,000 per year. (July 2008)

California students who struggle to pass the state's high-school exit exam can be identified as early as the fourth grade based on their grades, exam scores, and behavior, according to a Public Policy Institute of California [report](#). As a result, the report's authors suggest targeting more funds to students in early grades. (2008)

Reading

Children ages five through 17 enjoy reading for pleasure, although the percentage of children who read for this purpose declines as they age. The drop-off appears after age eight and continues through the teen years, according to the [2008 Kids and Family Reading Report](#) from Scholastic and research firm TSC. The study also found that 90 percent of children surveyed believe that they "need to be strong reader[s] to get into good college[s]." (June 2008)

The College Board's National Commission on Writing has joined with the OII-funded National Writing Project and Reading Is Fundamental to promote early childhood literacy with a new publication. [Our Book](#)

[By Us! \(Nuestro Libro ¡Hecho Por Nosotros!\)](#) is an activity book written in both English and Spanish, designed to encourage caregivers to read, write, and talk with their preschool-age children. (June 2008)

School Facilities

Climate change has spurred a surge of activity in “green” building efforts. At [Sidwell Friends](#), a private K-12 school in Washington, D.C., a rooftop garden is not only a teaching tool, but it harvests rainwater and adds insulation as well. The garden is among a wide array of energy-reducing devices that have earned the school the designation of a “platinum building,” the top rating in the [U.S. Green Building Council's](#) voluntary Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program. (August 2008)

School Improvement

Launched by the Public Education Network and funded by MetLife Foundation, a new [Civic Index for Quality Public Education](#) measures community support for public schools. The Web site helps communities identify strategies and resources to help improve support for public schools and aims to let communities know what they are doing right. (July 2008)

Using testing data from all 50 states, a new [study](#) from the Center on Education Policy seeks to answer whether student achievement has increased and achievement gaps have narrowed since NCLB was enacted. The study also includes a comparison between state test results and results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. According to the study, scores on state reading and mathematics exams have risen since 2002, and achievement gaps between various groups of students have narrowed. (June 24)

Teacher Quality and Development

A [study](#) from the National Research Council reveals that teachers who earn advanced certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards are more effective than other teachers in raising student achievement. The study, however, does not detect a causal link. It is available for purchase online. (June 2008)

Technology

A new NASA [Web site](#) allows children to follow Buzz Lightyear, the Disney animated character from the popular *Toy Story* movie and series, on a mission into space. Children can complete mathematics and science games along the way, and read transmissions from Buzz and his crew. The educational games reinforce concepts like gravity, and enable children to practice metric conversions and review space history and technology. (August 2008)

The Education Commission of the States has created two new online resources for policymakers. The [first](#) is a database related to STEM subjects that includes information related to students' access to and the quality of high school-level STEM programs. The [second](#) is a database related to career and technical education that provides data on 13 state policy indicators linked to program access and quality for all 50 states. (July 17)

Innovations in the News

Charter Schools/Choice

At Common Ground, a charter high school in New Haven, Conn., students pursue the school's environmental theme with hands-on experiences that integrate core subjects, such as “Egg and Seed,” which combines biology, ecology, and literature. The school is part of a nascent national consortium of some 120 like-minded charter schools in the Green Charter Schools Network. At Common Ground, students often begin high school performing several grade levels behind, but they quickly improve. [More—The [New York Times](#)] (July 27)

Parents in California have a new “one-stop shop” to compare the performance of their neighborhood schools. The [California School Finder](#) Web site, developed in partnership with Microsoft and Google, was

the idea of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who unveiled the site by noting that parents should be able to find information on schools online as easily as individuals who are looking for a new car can compare various models. Parents can find schools by city, address, or ZIP code, and then they can compare schools based on test scores, demographics, and graduation rates. [More—The [San Jose \(CA\) Mercury News](#)] (July 16)

Mayors in Rhode Island have authority from the state to create charter schools. The new “mayoral academies” will constitute partnerships between mayors and charter school operators. These academies were championed in the legislature by Cumberland, R.I., Mayor Daniel McKee and other city and town leaders in the state. [More—The [Buffalo News](#)] (July 7)

Raising Student Achievement

The generosity of local philanthropists in Kalamazoo, Mich., to pay college tuition for students who graduate from the city’s schools is not only increasing graduation rates, but also attracting new businesses and bolstering the local economy. “The Kalamazoo Promise,” introduced in 2005, covers 65 percent of tuition costs at state colleges and universities for students who attend at least high school in Kalamazoo. The initiative also provides full scholarships for those students who attend school in the city from kindergarten through 12th grade. Kaiser Aluminum Corp. chose Kalamazoo from among three cities to build a new complex, citing the city’s “Promise Initiative” as a major reason. [More—The [Wall Street Journal](#)] (July 28)

Nearly 70 school district representatives gathered last month in Houston to look at best practices for using data to manage various school functions, particularly those functions related to student achievement. The event was organized by the American Productivity and Quality Center, a Houston-based nonprofit formerly known for its work with corporations to improve performance and management strategies. One of the main differences between “best-practice districts” and the others that participated in the event was the use of data-specific professional development that helped teachers to use data in their classrooms. [More—[Education Week](#)] (July 23)

In Arizona, Gov. Janet Napolitano has partnered with a coalition of public and private entities to create the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Education Center. Housed in the nonprofit Science Foundation Arizona, the STEM Education Center “aims to promote teacher recruitment, training and retention, [and to] generate interest in mathematics and science among preschool through high-school students.” The center also works to encourage students to pursue degrees in STEM fields. Phoenix-based Freeport-McMoRan Copper and Gold Inc., the largest publicly owned copper producer in the country, helped to create the new center with a \$1.5 million donation. [More—The [Arizona Republic](#)] (July 16)

A summer program is making mathematics “hot” for both middle-school teachers and students from public school districts and 32 private schools in the St. Louis area. Teachers receive a week of intense professional development before teaming with their “aspiring mathematicians” – the 180 students from participating schools. The teachers and students join for two weeks of instruction. The effort is unique for its combination of teachers and students from public and private schools. It was made possible by a \$1.5 million U.S. Department of Education grant. [More—The [St. Louis Post Dispatch](#)] (July 2)

“Invention” was the theme of a summer camp in Minnesota this year, where some 3,000 students exercised their creativity and problem-solving skills by building, dismantling, and inventing everything from boats to “fling things.” Camp Invention is a national program in 47 states, serving an estimated 60,000 students each year. The camps started in Ohio with help from the Inventors Hall of Fame and the U.S. Patent Office. In Minnesota, 3M and Ford, among other corporations, helped sponsor 52 camp sessions statewide this summer. [More—[Minnesota Public Radio](#)] (July 2)

School Improvement

Baltimore City represented one of the bright spots in Maryland’s release of results from the latest Maryland State Assessment. While there were improvements in achievement across the state, according to Gov. Martin O’Malley, “Baltimore is leading the way.” Data-driven decision making, adherence to state curriculum standards, parent engagement, gifted education programs, and efforts to persuade gang members not to bring on new recruits from local schools were among the strategies that Baltimore City school leaders attributed to the dramatic increases in achievement. [More—The [Baltimore Sun](#)] (July 15)

In Los Angeles, the mayor's "Partnership for Los Angeles Schools" is opening two year-round high schools in communities where more than half of the students are expected to drop out before graduation. A total of 10 schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District have chosen to join Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's initiative, which plans to eventually serve more than 18,000 students. The partnership promises increased funding – based on private fundraising – and increased efficiencies in administrative budgets. [More—[The Los Angeles Times](#)] (July 1)

Teacher Quality and Development

Thanks to a new program from the Golden Apple Foundation, college students who aspire to be mathematics and science educators can teach alongside faculty at Illinois' highly regarded Math and Science Academy for five weeks this summer. The program, with support from a \$341,000 U.S. Department of Education grant, also encourages the prospective teachers to consider careers in under-resourced schools. Similar Golden Apple Foundation programs in other core academic subjects are held at DePaul University and Elmhurst College. [More—[The Chicago Tribune](#)] (July 29)

Several school districts in Maryland are instituting pay-for-performance plans for principals and teachers. In Baltimore, principals can earn up to 10 percent of their annual salaries. Criteria for the bonuses are being worked out in light of principals' increased autonomy in managing schools. The most ambitious plan, which also constitutes the first in the state, is about to get underway in Prince George's County. The district received a \$17 million federal grant for the effort. [More—[The Baltimore Sun](#)] (July 6)

Technology

The American Library Association, with support from the Verizon Foundation, has launched a study of teens' use of electronic gaming systems in public libraries. The study aims to analyze how games can improve players' literacy skills. Several libraries with spaces dedicated to electronic games are participating, such as the Quincie Douglas Branch Library in Tucson, Ariz., where pre-teens and teens gather away from adults to play on the Wii and PlayStation 2 game systems. A national panel of experts in gaming will monitor the investigation and develop a toolkit of strategies that libraries can use nationwide. [More—[The AP](#)] (July 21)

If the terms "mash-up" and "wiki" are not familiar to you, they may be in the future. They are attached to a growing movement of K-12 teachers using free educational resources on the Internet that can be changed and republished. Mash-ups are "digital medleys of content of various types" that teachers can adapt and revise based on their classroom use. Wikis are Web sites that teachers can develop with their classes, giving the students increased buy-in regarding content and instruction. [More—[Education Week](#)] (July 11)

Wikis were probably on the minds of attendees at the recent National Educational Computing Conference (NECC). The State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA) used the occasion to feature a new section on Apple's iTunes U that contains online resources for K-12 educators. Seven states along with individual school districts and other educational institutions are sharing resources via iTunes U. According to SETDA's executive director, "The new K-12 resources ... address the critical need to engage students through technology-based resources in the core curriculum areas." Among state-level efforts to contribute to the new pool of resources are Michigan's MI Learning Institute and Florida's Center for Instructional Technology. [More—[eSchool News](#)] (July 2)

At another session during NECC, the Office of Innovation and Improvement released its latest guide in the *Innovations in Education* series, *Evaluating Online Learning: Challenges and Strategies for Success*, through a live web cast. Featured presenters were Tim Wagner, director of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Technology, and a panel of online learning and evaluation experts. According to Susan Patrick, an attendee at the session and president and chief executive officer of the North American Council for Online Learning, the OII guide is the "first to fully address the issue [of] evaluating online programs in K-12 education." [More—[Education Week](#)] (July 2)

Purpose

The purpose of *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 U.S. Department of Education'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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