

Archived Information



The Education Innovator

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Special Note

Purpose

Feature

- Key Resources

What's New

- From the U.S.
- Department of Education
- American History
- Arts Education
- Charter Schools/Choice
- Closing the Achievement Gap
- No Child Left Behind (NCLB)
- Raising Student Achievement
- Teacher Quality and Development
- Technology

Innovations in the News

- Arts Education
- Raising Student Achievement
- School Improvement
- Teacher Quality and Development
- Technology

Contributors

- Disclaimer

Special Note

A note from Morgan Brown, Assistant Deputy Secretary: "Today I will be leaving my position in the Office of Innovation and Improvement at the U.S. Department of Education to return to my home and family in Minnesota and begin a new position as an Assistant Commissioner at the Minnesota Department of Education. I want to thank the more than 10,000 readers of *The Education Innovator* for their continuing interest in the federal education programs, innovative schools, and other reform initiatives featured in this newsletter. I look forward to rejoining your ranks as a regular and avid consumer of the news and resources included in the *Innovator* just as I was before serving in the Department."

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.

Morgan S. Brown, Assistant Deputy Secretary, OII, and Lauren Maddox, Assistant Secretary, OCO, sponsor *The Education Innovator*, which is published monthly and distributed through EDPUBS.

Feature

Welcome to the Cyber Classroom

Kevin left school when his mom went to jail. He worked long hours to support himself, so he couldn't attend regular classes. After he moved in with a cousin who convinced him to try online courses, he thought he'd give it a try. Without school or parental support, he struggled to finish the online classes on time and to pass the

exams, but he found support from teachers and the flexibility he needed through the virtual classroom, and he eventually earned his high school diploma.

The fictional story above, which is based on a number of real-life accounts, demonstrates how online courses can meet the needs of many kinds of students, and why these courses are here to stay. Like Kevin, middle school and high school students are dropping out in record numbers. A recent report, [*The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*](#), found that "circumstances in students' lives and an inadequate response to those circumstances from the schools led to dropping out." Most students surveyed for the report said that their classes were uninteresting and lacked opportunities for "real-world" learning, so the students lost interest in going to school. Other reasons that students dropped out included the need to make money, to care for a family member, to raise a child, or because academic challenges caused them to fail or fall behind due to a lack of earlier preparation.

Appropriately implemented, online learning can enable districts to provide solutions to help address each of these reasons students leave school and as a consequence, could play an important role in reducing the current rate of high school dropouts. A [*Project Tomorrow*](#) survey of more than 319,000 K-12 students nationwide discovered that 57 percent of high school students indicated interest in or have taken an online course in the past year, and 39 percent liked the self-pacing that online classes could provide. In 2007, the [*North American Council for Online Learning*](#) (NACOL) found that "42 states have significant supplemental

online learning programs, or significant full-time programs, or both. Only eight states do not have either of these options, and several of these states have begun planning for online learning development.”

The Growth of Online Learning

Teens are one of America’s fastest growing groups of online users and consumers. Just six years ago, surveys showed that merely 60 percent of American school-aged children used the Internet. Yet as of November 2006, a [PEW Internet & American Life Project](#) survey showed a dramatic increase, with 93 percent of teenagers online regularly and more than nine in 10 Americans between the ages of 12 and 17 using the Internet. The fact is that more teens than ever before use the Internet as a way to interact with others--and it’s not just to send and receive email, but to create and share information and content more often than any other age group in the country.

While teens are immersed in the online culture, according to a 2007 survey by the [Sloan Consortium](#), only 700,000 public school students, mostly high schoolers, enrolled in online courses in 2005-06. While the total number represents a very small sample of the total high school population, the latest Sloan figures represent a tenfold increase over the number enrolled in online courses over their survey in the year 2000, and that number is growing. A 2002-03 National for Education Statistics (NCES) [report](#) on distance learning found that an estimated 8,200 public schools had students enrolled in technology-based distance education courses, which represents 9 percent of all public schools nationwide. That survey revealed that the percentage of schools with students enrolled in distance education courses varied substantially by the instructional level of the school. Overall, 38 percent of public high schools offered distance education courses, compared with 20 percent of combined or ungraded schools, 4 percent of middle or junior high schools, and fewer than 1 percent of elementary schools.

While some schools do respond to and embrace this new teen culture, there is still a “digital disconnect” between schools and students. In the 2002 PEW Internet & American Life Project study, [The Digital Disconnect: The Widening Gap Between Internet-Savvy Students and Their Schools](#), students revealed that the Internet helped them do their homework, and they described many other ways the Internet is used for education-related activities. Indeed, they use the Web as an “online textbook.” They sift through reference materials, organize information, and study with friends through instant messaging. Students report, however, that there is a “substantial disconnect between how they use the Internet for school and how they use the Internet during the school day and under teacher direction.” And even in the relatively small number of well-connected schools, students report that the quality of web-based assignments can be poor and uninspiring. Since then, there is increased acceptance of online curriculum, but many schools and teachers have not acknowledged that “online” is the way students communicate.

It is possible, nevertheless, to provide quality online learning opportunities that engage and inspire students. The number of online providers that utilize Internet technology to deliver effective, non-traditional learning approaches to students is growing, and several states are moving ahead with legislation that will offer online curricula as a practical alternative to the traditional classroom.

Challenging Students Outside the Classroom Walls

“Harnessing the power of innovation for the benefit of American schools is fast becoming an education imperative,” said Secretary Spellings in the introduction to the newest OII Innovations in Education Guide, [Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online](#). The Guide, along with a [webcast](#) that promoted its availability this past December, focuses on case studies from six providers who offer rigorous curricula to students through the Web. The online content includes a variety of Advanced Placement (AP) courses, International Baccalaureate (IB) classes, and other dual enrollment options that enable students to earn college credit while still in high school.

The Guide gives examples of promising practices in key areas including ensuring course quality; recruiting, counseling, and supporting students; and tracking outcomes for continuous improvement. According to the introduction, the Guide’s “aim is to familiarize districts and schools with the issues they must consider and address if students are to achieve success in this new form of learning.” But students are ready to welcome the virtual classroom.

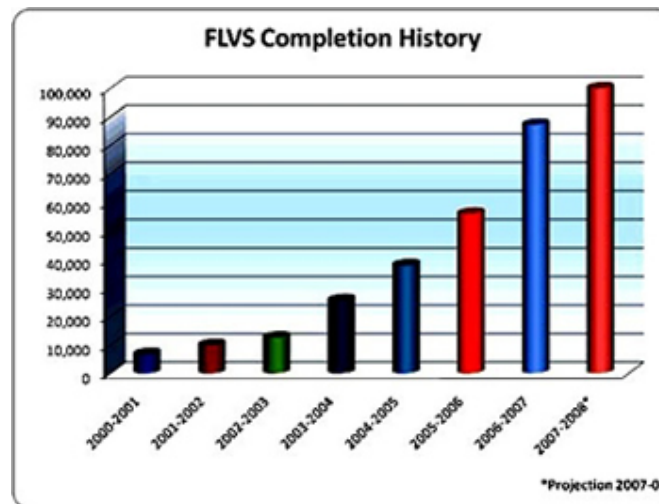
Jesse, a very bright student, who found many classes uninteresting, was energized by the idea of taking more advanced classes than offered at her high school, with the idea that she could graduate early and attend college. She is taking online AP Macroeconomics in the tenth grade. She chose online classes so she can challenge herself in ways she never thought possible.

Motivated students such as Jesse, who are looking to expand their educational options, are just as likely to find online courses beneficial as students with academic challenges. Yet, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), advanced courses in English, mathematics, science, and foreign language are unavailable to as many as a quarter of high school students. Educators say there are various reasons schools cannot offer advanced classes—lack of qualified teachers, low student interest, and students' scheduling conflicts are the most common. Online courses are one way to help overcome these barriers and bridge the gap.

Florida Virtual School—An Example of a Program that Serves a Range of Students

One of the providers featured in the guide, [Florida Virtual School](#) (FLVS), serves students who are prepared for and interested in enrolling in AP courses and those who might benefit from a virtual classroom because of their special circumstances. Florida law requires that priority for age and grade appropriate classes be given to students from schools that are rural, low-performing, high-minority, and home- or hospital-bound students. Thanks to state funding, FLVS classes are free for all Florida students and open to non-Florida residents who pay a nominal fee.

FLVS offers a range of online courses and tools, including the following: 11 AP courses; core academic courses such as English and mathematics; online preparation classes for Florida's statewide assessments; SAT preparation courses; and AP exam reviews. Since its inception in 1997, when it offered just five classes serving 77 students, FLVS has continued to grow. It now offers more than 85 classes serving over 31,000 students.



Over the past eight years, more and more students have taken FLVS courses

Most recently, they have added a middle school program that will have regular and accelerated classes. According to one educator, “Adding middle school online courses partners very nicely with the opportunities to offer middle school students pre-AP level courses. In our experience with the online Advanced Placement, you really need to work with students at the middle school level with some kind of course that’s going to excite them about advanced coursework and engage them in curriculum that they are going to need to succeed in AP at the high school level.”

Students and parents are enthusiastic about their experiences with FLVS. One parent said that FLVS “was the best thing to ever happen to my son’s life. ... It saved at least one kid from being lost in the system. He probably would have dropped out.” Another parent said that FLVS has filled a need for them because, due to her husband’s job, they live in a rural area that doesn’t have the advanced courses her child needed, and the online school “allows us to stay together as a family a lot more than if she were enrolled in the local high

school full-time.” Another student said, “I am currently taking Marine Science Honors through the Florida Virtual School, as well as going to [my local] high school. The Virtual School is a great institution. It has allowed me to take extra courses, and now I can graduate a year early. This program has been a tremendous help to me.”

Teachers at FLVS are dedicated and engaged, collaborating from different content areas in teams known as “schoolhouses.” They share perspectives about teaching so that others can gather new ideas and creatively improve their own methods. FLVS employs 425 full-time and 200 part-time state certified instructors, boasting a 95 percent teacher retention rate.

Online education can help students succeed, giving them opportunities to take advanced courses, to take more interesting courses than those offered at their local school, or simply to provide the challenge and incentive to stay in school. They serve an important purpose in today’s information age, and there is no doubt that delivering coursework over the Internet is a development whose time has come.

Key Resources

- [*Connecting Students to Advanced Courses Online*](#) (2007)
- [*Learning in the 21st Century: A National Report of Online Learning*](#) (2007)
- [*Project Tomorrow*](#) (responsible for annual “Speak Up” surveys)
- [*The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*](#) (2006)
- [*The Digital Disconnect: The Widening Gap Between Internet-Savvy Students and Their Schools*](#) (2002)
- [*Teens and Social Media: The use of social media gains a greater foothold in teen life as they embrace the conversational nature of interactive online media*](#) (2007)
- [Florida Virtual School](#), Orlando, FL
Julie Young, President and CEO
Lori Gully, Director of Florida Services
- [North American Council for Online Learning](#)
- [*Distance Education Courses for Public Elementary and Secondary School Students: 2002-03*](#)
National Center for Education Statistics

What’s New

From the U.S. Department of Education

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, on a national tour to discuss *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), [participated](#) in an education policy roundtable meeting in Baton Rouge with Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal and Louisiana Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek. The Secretary praised gains made by students in the state and noted opportunities for improvement that could help build on Louisiana’s progress such as raising high school achievement, increasing the number of highly qualified teachers in core academic classes, and improving the high school graduation rate. (Jan. 31)

Secretary Spellings [visited](#) St. Peter Claver Catholic Central School, a Pre-K to 8th grade elementary school in New Orleans, and praised the school for their dedication to preparing all students for the global knowledge economy. In New Orleans she also announced a \$2.6 million School Improvement Grant for Louisiana to help turn around low-performing schools. (Jan. 31)



Secretary Spellings visits a classroom at St. Peter Claver School in New Orleans, Louisiana.

As part of her national tour to discuss NCLB, Secretary Spellings traveled to Alabama where Governor Bob Riley hosted an education policy roundtable with state legislators, educators, and business leaders at the Alabama State House in Montgomery to discuss how the federal government can partner with the state and districts to support innovation and get every child performing on grade level or better. She also kicked off Black History Month by participating in a meeting with African American leaders at a roundtable meeting hosted by 100 Black Men of America to discuss raising student achievement. (Feb. 1)

Secretary Spellings unveiled President Bush's FY 2009 budget request, which focuses on strengthening *NCLB* so that all students will perform on grade level or above by 2014, challenging high school students with rigorous coursework, closing the achievement gap, and making college more affordable. Spellings made special mention of the budget request to restore funding for Reading First and to target resources to schools and students who need it most. The President's budget includes an increase in funding for NCLB to \$24.5 billion, up 41 percent since 2001, and support for Title I Grants to high-poverty schools that is stronger than ever at \$14.3 billion, an increase of 63 percent since the enactment of NCLB. (Feb. 4)

Secretary Spellings announced the creation of Teaching Ambassador Fellowship (TAF) positions at the U.S. Department of Education. TAF will provide two kinds of opportunities for teachers across the country. Up to 20 Classroom Fellows will be chosen who remain at their local schools under their regular teaching contracts and will provide their experience and perspectives to the Department through various part-time assignments and projects. Up to five Washington Fellows will become full-time federal employees in Washington, D.C., working on education programs and participating in policy discussions. Applications are due by April 7. (Feb. 8)



The February edition of the "Education News Parents Can Use" television program highlighted dropout prevention strategies that work, including adolescent reading interventions, intensive tutoring and remediation techniques, alternative high school programs, mentoring initiatives, and community college dual enrollment programs.

NCLB focuses on improvement of public schools serving low-income students and on strategies to help students stay in school and on pace for success. For more information, go to <http://www.ed.gov/edtv/>. To watch the archived webcast go to: <http://www.connectlive.com/events/ednews/>.)

The National Center for Special Education Research is sponsoring a two-day training institute to increase the capacity of researchers to conduct rigorous special education research, using single-case methodologies that incorporate quantitative analyses. The institute will be held in Washington, D.C., from April 15-16. For more information, please contact Kristen Lauer, or Erin Caffrey. (Feb. 2008)

Assessments in music and visual arts begin this winter for eighth graders in selected schools who will participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress. For more information about these innovative surveys, download the Sample Questions Booklet for music and visual arts. The arts were last assessed in 1997, and the results may be viewed online. (Jan. 28)

The Department's [What Works Clearinghouse](#) has released two new intervention reports developed under the Clearinghouse's dropout prevention review. The first is on New Chance, a program for young welfare mothers who have dropped out of school. The second is on First Things First, a program designed to boost student achievement in schools serving a large number of economically disadvantaged students. (Jan. 24)

American History

On February 26, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) launched its Picturing America initiative, which will promote the teaching, study, and understanding of American history and its culture in K-12 schools and public libraries through some of our nation's greatest works of art. Picturing America features 40 high-quality reproductions (24" x 36") of noteworthy American works of art, an illustrated resource book, and a comprehensive Web site with additional information about the artwork, artists, and more. For information, including eligibility, and to apply, visit <http://PicturingAmerica.neh.gov>. Applications for the fall of 2008 are being accepted through April 15.

Researchers gave blank paper and pencils to a diverse group of 2,000 high school juniors and seniors in all 50 states and instructed them: "Name the ten most famous Americans in history, excluding presidents and first ladies." The results? African-Americans and women topped the list, with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Harriet Tubman rounding out the top three. Sam Wineburg, a Stanford University education and history professor, and Chauncey Monte-Sano of the University of Maryland led the study, which is scheduled to appear in the March issue of [The Journal of American History](#). (Feb. 2008)

Arts Education

The newest in a series of reports on arts education from Dana Press, *Transforming Arts Teaching: The Role of Higher Education*, examines innovations in arts teacher training and features best practices at 24 higher-education institutions. Also included are proceedings from The Dana Foundation's 2007 national symposium on how colleges, universities, and conservatories can enhance arts learning. ([Free pdf version](#)). To request free copies of the publication, contact Johanna Goldberg (jgoldberg@dana.org) at The Dana Foundation. An archived [webcast series from Dana's National Symposium on Arts Education](#) is also available. (Jan. 3)

A national [poll](#) reveals that a majority of U.S. voters agree that building students' imagination is important to innovation and to their future success in the global, knowledge-based economy. A new Web site, [The ImagineNation](#), provides both information about the survey and resources that respond to the "public understanding...that building capacities of the imagination rests primarily with an education in and through the arts and that the arts are essential to invigorating the teaching of other fundamental school subjects." (Jan. 24)

The [Artist/Teacher Institute International](#), a project of the Maryland State Department of Education and the Arts Education in Maryland Schools Alliance, is accepting applications from teachers and school administrators for the July 20-26 institute at the University of Maryland, University College, in Adelphi, Maryland. Participants will attend performances and hands-on workshops to explore the roles of dance, music, theatre, and visual arts in teaching and learning as well as design arts-integrated lessons and assessment strategies. The deadline for registration is March 14. (Feb. 2008)

Charter Schools/Choice

Students who participate in Milwaukee's voucher program graduate from high school at significantly higher rates than those who attend public secondary schools in the city, according to a new [report](#) from the University of Minnesota. The report finds that graduation rates are about 10 or more percentage points higher in private high schools in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program than in the Milwaukee Public Schools. (Jan. 2008)

President Bush's call in his State of the Union address for a \$300 million program called Pell Grants for Kids would fund scholarship programs for low-income parents to help send their children to higher-performing, out-of-district public schools or private and religious schools. The new program would be modeled after the

smaller federally financed [D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program](#), which has provided more than \$14 million a year for low-income children to attend private and religious schools in the nation's capital. (Jan. 29)

The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation [announced](#) a donation of \$23.3 million to support 17 new charter schools in Los Angeles run by Aspire Public Schools, the Knowledge Is Power Program, and Pacific Charter School Development, Inc. Over the last eight years, the foundation has invested nearly \$90 million to support the growth of charter schools in a small number of cities, including Los Angeles, New York City, Oakland, and Philadelphia. (Jan. 23)

Closing the Achievement Gap

According to the seventh annual "funding gap" [report](#) from The Education Trust, too many states still provide the least amount of funding to school districts serving students with the greatest needs. The report includes state-by-state analyses of funding trends from 1999 to 2005, comparing the resources available to school districts serving the highest percentages of low-income and minority students to the resources available to districts serving the lowest percentages of such students. For the first time, the report also focuses on districts serving English language learners. (Jan. 2008)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The National Council on Disability has issued a progress [report](#) on NCLB and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). According to the report, the accountability systems created by NCLB have led to some benefits for students with disabilities. Teachers are paying more attention to these students, but states need assistance to train more professionals to handle students' needs. The report posits that the federal government should provide more guidance. (Jan. 28)

Raising Student Achievement

QuestBridge, a nonprofit program that provides assistance to low-income students, is accepting [applications](#) for its 2008 College Prep Scholarships. High school juniors are eligible to receive assistance, which can include full scholarships to summer school programs at private colleges and universities, counseling and advice about college admissions, and "tele-mentoring" with current college students. The deadline for applications is March 31. (Feb. 2008)

William Guenther, president and founder of Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, and Andrew Calkins, its senior vice president, have issued a report funded through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation called [The Turnaround Challenge](#). The report calls for state-supported "zones" in which schools are offered "changed operating conditions" in exchange for greater accountability. The report also urges states and districts to make use of successful charter management groups and other institutions. (Feb. 2008)

Teacher Quality and Development

Paying teachers based on their performance in the classroom has resulted in better test scores for students, a recent [study](#) from the University of Arkansas has found. Researchers examined a merit pay program called the Achievement Challenge Pilot Project (ACPP) in Little Rock. Through ACPP, teachers could earn bonuses amounting to as much as \$11,000 based on how much their students' scores improved. (Jan. 22)

The National Park Service offers teachers a unique way to spend their summers and enrich their classrooms through the [Teacher to Ranger to Teacher](#) (TRT) program. Through the program, teachers from low-income school districts spend their summer vacation working as park rangers and performing various duties from developing and presenting interpretive programs to creating curriculum-based materials for the parks. During the school year, teachers present lessons that draw on their summer experiences. (Feb. 2008)

Technology

Educators worldwide need more technological skills to effectively integrate technology into classroom lessons, according to a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [report](#). The group recommends countries devise professional development programs to help educators acquire such skills. (Jan. 2008)

A [Web site](#) from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), “Highlights for High School,” offers free course materials tailored for K-12 teachers and students. Free video, audio, print lectures, and other materials on the site are taken straight from MIT classrooms. The site is an extension of MIT’s [OpenCourseWare](#) initiative, launched in 2001 with the aim of providing free public access to the university’s courses and curricula via the Internet. (Feb. 2008)

Innovations in the News

Arts Education

For teachers in Flagstaff (AZ) schools, keeping “score” is not about touchdowns or field goals, but success with integrating music into their non-music classrooms. Sponsored by the San Francisco Symphony, in collaboration with the Flagstaff Symphony, the local school district, and Coconino County, the Flagstaff-area Keeping Score project is part of a nationwide arts-integration initiative that connects teachers from its five participating school districts with one another via a special Web site. Teacher teams also spend two weeks in San Francisco for training, meet regularly in their local districts for additional professional development, and share ideas about their arts-integration efforts. [More— [The Arizona Daily Sun](#) (Flagstaff)] (Jan. 18)

Despite reports of music programs being diminished to make way for increases in reading and mathematics instruction, the San Diego Unified Schools are finding ways to ensure weekly instruction in instrumental music for fifth grade students throughout the district, with some schools also offering instruction to fourth graders. Instrumental classes are scheduled using three different structures: pull-out, exploratory, and full-grade, the last providing all fifth graders the opportunity to learn to play an instrument or to participate in chorus. [More— [San Diego Union-Tribune](#)] (Feb.7)

Raising Student Achievement

Response to Intervention (RTI), an instructional framework used in a number of districts to implement the Reading First Initiative, relies on early screening to detect learning difficulties, followed by scientifically based interventions and “progress monitoring” throughout the year. Districts such as Sully in Iowa, with the assistance of the Heartland Area Education Agency, have found success with their version of RTI, which they call “instructional decisionmaking.”

A recent *Education Week* [Web chat](#) focused on the growing use of RTI. Guests during the live chat included Maurice McInerney, managing director of the American Institutes of Research and co-project director of the National Center on Response to Intervention, and Evelyn Johnson, co-author of *RTI: A Practitioner’s Guide to Implementing Response to Intervention*. [More—[Education Week \(premium article access compliments of Edweek.org\)](#)] (Jan.18)

Administrators in Clover, North Carolina, are implementing Grade 8.5, which provides a transition to high school for students whose test scores indicate they are not ready to do high school work. The program is an acceleration model consisting of “intense academic acceleration in math and reading, designed around individual needs as documented by MAP testing,” according to Ron Wright, principal at Clover High School, where the Grade 8.5 classes will be scheduled. (Measures of Academic Progress or MAP are state-aligned computerized adaptive tests that accurately reflect the instructional level of each student and measure growth over time.) Class sizes will be limited to about 18 students, who will have both an extended instructional day and Saturday school when needed. [More—The [Clover \(NC\) Herald](#)] (Jan.31)

In a newly announced public-private partnership, the Ohio STEM Learning Network’s goal is to “connect 100,000 students over the next 10 years to high-tech careers aimed at helping to fuel the economy.” With

the help of a \$12 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the new network will begin with regionally located schools focused on skills development in the STEM subjects – science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Middle and high school students from low-income and minority communities will participate. [More— [Education Week](#)] (Feb.6) (*paid subscription required*)

Joining other states that have added extracurricular requirements for high school graduation, Maine is requiring seniors to complete a college application before gaining their diplomas. It is the only state to have this particular requirement, which was prompted by a desire to increase the number of students attending colleges in the state. Maine's current college degree attainment rate is the lowest among the New England states. [More— [U.S. News & World Report](#)] (Feb. 7)

A study by the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Pennsylvania, and Michigan State University of more than 6,000 high school students found that "high school girls, more than boys, look to their close friends when they make decisions such as whether to take math courses and what math classes to take." The study's findings, which appear in the journal *Child Development*, included girls' greater reliance on social factors, especially when "enrollment in math classes was optional and when girls were doing well in school." [More—[UPI](#)] (Feb.8)

While the debate continues as to whether paying students for achievement is effective, Baltimore City is the latest district to implement a cash-incentive program aimed at positively affecting scores on achievement tests and passing grades on state graduation exams. The Baltimore program is especially geared to students for whom a necessary job in the after-school hours prevents them from taking advantage of tutoring programs. It's a "way to reimburse them for missing that work," according to Baltimore City Schools chief executive officer Andrés Alonso. In New York City, an evaluation of a similar pay-for-academic-performance effort got underway last year. [More— [Education Week](#)] (Feb. 8) (*paid subscription required*)

School Improvement

Officials of the Recovery School District, Orleans Parish School Board, and education nonprofits in New Orleans have streamlined a school attendance application process with a uniform timeline that applies to nearly all of the city's schools. Since the establishment of the Recovery District and the increase in charter schools following Hurricane Katrina, the uneven system of selecting and applying to schools has been confusing for parents. [More—[New Orleans Times-Picayune](#)] (Jan.28)

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has given \$10.3 million to the Chicago Public Schools' Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) (see [Innovator](#), May 23, 2005), which manages the district's "turnaround" schools as well as a teaching academy geared to the specific needs of the city's schools and teachers. Part of the Gates funding, which will cover a three-year period, will allow AUSL to transform three underperforming Chicago high schools and to expand its teacher residency program. [More— [The Chicago Daily News](#)] (Jan.31)

With the use of substitute teachers increasing, along with concerns that students who spend extended time with substitutes may have lower test scores, St. Paul Minn. school officials are reducing absences of regular teachers for staff development through use of in-room training with coaches who observe teachers and provide feedback. According to the district, half of the number of days teachers would have been absent for training have been cut so far this year. [More— [Minneapolis Star Tribune](#)] (Feb.3)

While research is not conclusive as to a link between longer school days and increased achievement, several states and cities are experimenting with different approaches to squeeze more time into the day, week, or year. Massachusetts is investing \$13 million this year to pilot longer school days at 18 schools, and similar efforts are underway in New Mexico, New York, and the city of Pittsburgh. [More— [The Washington Post](#)] (Feb.4) (*free registration required*)

The University of North Carolina and Pennsylvania State University initiated the Family Life Project in 2002, in order to track the lives of children in poor, isolated rural areas and small towns. Thus far, project researchers have followed the lives of nearly 1,300 children born between September 2003 and the following September. A new \$12.8 million grant from the National Institutes of Health is allowing the project

to continue for another five years, during which time the directors expect to create the “most comprehensive and representative study to date of children’s development in rural America.” [More— [Education Week](#)] (Feb.6) (*paid subscription required*)

Teacher Quality and Development

Three charter-school-management organizations—Leaders of Uncommon Schools, KIPP in New York City, and Achievement First—have joined with Hunter College, the City University of New York’s teacher-preparation school, to pilot a program for teachers who need to gain their provisional certifications and eventually the master’s degree required by the state. Tentatively called the Teacher YOU Training Institute, courses are co-taught by charter school staff members and Hunter faculty. In addition to classes scheduled in the evenings and summer, an arrangement with AmeriCorps is helping to make the costs of courses almost free for participating teachers. [More— [Education Week](#)] (Feb. 6) (*paid subscription required*)

Forty-three of the 50 largest school districts in Texas have “the highest concentration of teachers with fewer than three years experience in their poorest schools,” according to a new study by the Education Trust. “Educationally deadly” is how the report describes the effect over time of assigning ineffective teachers to low-performing students. Other findings include lower salaries for teachers who lack credentials and experience and consistently high teacher turnover in high-poverty, high-minority schools. [More— [Dallas Morning News](#)] (Feb. 8)

Technology

Three former FCC chairmen have joined with Common Sense Media to create the Digital Kids Task Force to “address the fact that kids are living in this digital space today and will be even more so over the next 10 or 20 years,” according to Common Sense CEO James Steyer. The task force is asking Congress to establish a nonprofit corporation financed through congressional appropriations, donations, grants, and other public funds to support education efforts and research into the impact of digital media on children. [More— [Broadcasting & Cable](#)] (Jan. 23)

Global positioning systems (GPS) and “high-tech scavenger hunts” can bring together “lessons on satellites, latitude and longitude, mapping, distance, and problem-solving,” with the added benefit of students learning about team work and collaboration, according to Cindy Gault, an area director for the Texas Computer Education Association (TCEA), who participated in just such an activity with other educators at TCEA’s recent conference in Austin. Called “geocaching,” the scavenger hunts involve locating hidden outdoor objects using a geocaching Web site or handheld GPS devices. [More— [eSchool News](#)] (Feb. 8)

Online courses can be a lifeline for students who, for a number of reasons, find themselves short of needed credits to graduate from high school but are unable to attend regular classes. In Arlington County, Virginia, EdOptions courses are part of the district’s anti-dropout strategy at Arlington Mill High School. Some students drop out due to illness or the need to work to support their families, and others are looking for the independence that online learning offers. [More— [The Washington Post](#)] (Feb. 11) (*free registration required*)

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