



Testimony of  
The Honorable Sonny Perdue, Governor of Georgia

On behalf of  
The National Governors Association

Submitted to the U.S. House Education and Labor Committee  
*Improved Competitiveness and Academic Standards*

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Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, and members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to submit this testimony on behalf of the National Governors Association.

In today's world, high wages follow high skills, and long-term economic growth increasingly depends on educational excellence. Ensuring that students are well-prepared for the demands of the global marketplace is a top priority for the nation's governors.

### **The Imperative for Common, Internationally Benchmarked Standards**

Around the globe, governments are eagerly comparing their educational outcomes to the best in the world. The goal is not just to see how they rank, but rather to identify and learn from those who've made the greatest gains and highest achievement—from nations and states that offer ideas for boosting performance. This process, known as international benchmarking, has become a critical tool for governments striving to create world-class education systems.

Countries and states have good reason to make the effort. Technological, economic, and political trends have combined to increase demand for higher skills while heightening competition for quality jobs. Rule-bound jobs on factory floors and in offices are being automated and outsourced. The world's economy, driven today by knowledge and innovation, favors workers who have postsecondary education or training, strong fundamental skills in math and reading, and the ability to solve unfamiliar problems and communicate effectively.

At the same time, new technologies and corporate strategies have opened the global labor market to billions of people from places like Eastern Europe, India, China, and Brazil who had been left out. An increasing variety of work tasks can be digitized and performed nearly anywhere in the world. More jobs are going to the best educated no matter where they live, which means that Americans will face more competition than ever for work.

### **American Education Lagging Behind**

American education has not adequately responded to these challenges. The United States is falling behind other countries in the resource that matters most in the new global economy—human capital. American 15-year-olds ranked 25<sup>th</sup> in math and 21<sup>st</sup> in science achievement on the most recent international assessment conducted in 2006. The United States is rapidly losing its edge in educational attainment as well. As recently as 1995, America still tied for first in college and university graduation rates but by 2006 had dropped to 14<sup>th</sup>. That same year, it had the second-highest college dropout rate of 27 countries.

### **States Leading the Way**

States have both the authority and the responsibility to provide students with a high-quality education, and states *already* are deeply engaged in efforts to raise standards, advance teaching quality, and improve low-performing schools. International benchmarking provides an additional tool for making that process more effective, offering insights and ideas that cannot be garnered solely from looking within and across state lines. International benchmarking is important to Governors not only because it enables them to compare their own state's educational outcomes to top performers around the world, but also to identify and learn from high achievers and those who have made significant progress. By international benchmarking, we seek to understand what best practices can be adapted or adopted to improve our state systems in standards, assessments, human capital, curricula, and accountability.

In Georgia, for example, I have made it a top priority to have students graduating from high school ready for both college and the workforce. I was the first Governor to champion an initiative to place a graduation coach in every Georgia high school to strategically move at-risk students to a path towards graduation. Our graduation rate now stands at an all-time high of 75.4%. I established the Georgia Virtual School to give our high school students across the state access to rigorous coursework, including college-level courses. As a result, Georgia now ranks 15<sup>th</sup> in the nation for the percentage of high school seniors who score at mastery level on an AP exam. Our students, including minority students and those who are economically disadvantaged, are enrolling in AP courses and passing AP exams at unprecedented levels in Georgia.

It's not enough to help students meet rigorous requirements to graduate from high school; we have to prepare them for post-secondary opportunities as well. I've led the state's effort to raise SAT scores in Georgia through the Governor's Cup Challenge, a friendly competition among high schools to raise and sustain SAT scores, and through a College Board SAT online preparation course that is offered at no charge to every public, private, and home-schooled student.

While these are important steps, I know that if Georgia's high school graduates are to compete successfully against students from other countries, we will need to do more.

Governors know that ensuring state education systems are internationally competitive requires a joint effort, which is why we partnered with organizations representing our nation's education chiefs and business leaders to develop a set of state actions. These recommendations are included in *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*, a report issued by the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, Inc and attached to my testimony. To develop these recommendations, our organizations convened a top-notch advisory group that I, Governor Sonny Perdue of Georgia, co-chaired along with former Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano and Intel Chairman Craig Barrett. Members of the group included leading educators, researchers, business executives, and current and former state and federal officials.

The advisory group insisted that the effort be led by states, that the recommended actions be bold, and that the report be based on the most current research and practices. The group unanimously agreed to five action steps that states can take:

- Upgrade state standards by adopting a common core of internationally benchmarked standards in math and language arts for grades K-12 to ensure that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to be globally competitive;
- Leverage states' collective influence to ensure that textbooks, digital media, curricula, and assessments are aligned to internationally benchmarked standards and draw on lessons from high-performing nations and states;
- Revise state policies for recruiting, preparing, developing, and supporting teachers and school leaders to reflect the human capital practices of top-performing nations and states around the world;
- Hold schools and systems accountable through monitoring, interventions, and support to ensure consistently high performance, drawing upon international best practices; and

- Measure state-level education performance globally by examining student achievement and attainment in an international context to ensure that, over time, students are receiving the education they need to compete in the 21st century economy.

Benchmarking is not just about measuring and comparing outcomes. It is also—and most critically—about improving policy, and because of that, states must take the lead. States have primary authority over policy areas that other nations are most eager to benchmark and improve: standards, assessment, curriculum, and the education workforce.

### **Federal Government Support**

While we believe states must lead this effort, we also believe that the federal government can play a critical enabling role grounded in a new vision of the historic state-federal partnership in education—one that is less restrictive and mandate-driven and more encouraging of innovation. As states take on the important work of benchmarking their education systems to the best in the world, the federal government can assist states in specific ways at each stage of the journey.

The federal government might focus resources toward better research and development in this area to provide state leaders with more and better information about tools for benchmarking and international best practices in education.

As states reach important milestones on the way toward building internationally competitive education systems, the federal government should offer a range of tiered incentives to make the next stage of the journey easier. With accountability at the core for greater results, such incentives could include:

- Increased flexibility in the use of federal funds and
- Increased flexibility in meeting requirements of existing federal education laws so that states are not thwarted in their efforts to adapt and adopt international best practices.

Flexibility is a critically important way in which to help states, which I've seen first hand with my Investing in Educational Excellence (IE<sup>2</sup>) legislation. IE<sup>2</sup> allows local boards of education to contract with the State Board of Education for flexibility from specific state laws and rules. In exchange, the local system agrees to accountability that exceeds all federal expectations. Systems will lose governance over their schools that do not meet such performance goals. In its first year in law, IE<sup>2</sup> has attracted two of the largest systems in Georgia, and over 12 percent of our students will begin the 2009-10 school year under an IE<sup>2</sup> performance contract.

### **Recent State Action**

Governors and chief state school officers are actively forging a partnership among states to develop a set of common core standards that will be aligned with college and work expectations, include rigorous content and skills, and be benchmarked internationally. Working under the auspices of NGA and CCSSO, states will develop K-12 standards in English language arts and mathematics that are based on best research and evidence, and will develop common assessments aligned to these standards.

### **Conclusion**

Governors and state education leaders are moving quickly to take action. We look forward to engaging the support of Congress and the Administration. Especially in light of the current economic downturn, more than ever we must ensure that American students are well prepared to compete for jobs in the global economy. The future of our nation depends on it.