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September 9, 2010

TO: Members of the Education Committee

FR: Representative Tommy Benton, Georgia
Chair, Education Committee

RE: Report of Activities of the Education Committee at the 64th Annual Meeting of the Southern Legislative Conference in Charleston, South Carolina, July 31 - August 4, 2010

The SLC Education Committee convened on Sunday, August 1, for a business session, and on Monday, August 2, for a program session during the 64th Annual Meeting. The following is a summary of the speaker presentations and Committee activities from each of these programs. An attendance list is attached. In addition, accompanying this chair's report you will find a meeting brochure for The Council of State Governments' 2010 National Conference in Providence, Rhode Island, December 3-6.

BUSINESS SESSION, AUGUST 1

I. Reforming Student Assessments

Margaret Horn, Director, State Leadership and Policy
Development, Achieve, Inc., Washington, D.C.

Louis M. "Lou" Fabrizio, Ph.D., Director of Accountability
Policy & Communications, Division of Accountability
Services, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

Background

Over the past decade, states have demanded more accountability from schools, asking them to measure and monitor student outcomes and progress. States now spend billions on testing student performance. But in some ways these tests and the systems in place to support them are not up to the task demanded of them. Student assessments have become more than a tool to determine what students know, as they play an increasingly larger role in education policy, determining at times student promotion, school success and, in some places, teacher performance. States are working on new models of testing to provide better, more timely information to teachers to help shape instruction and improve outcomes and to provide educators, parents and policymakers with information that they can use to support this work.

Ms. Horn's Presentation

Ms. Horn began her remarks by noting that there has been a focus recently on states working together on common core standards and assessments. This work builds on efforts underway in several states for some years. She added that

since at least the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, state and federal policies have created an incentive to set the bar low with respect to standards.

In 2007, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce released a state-by-state comparison of educational effectiveness that gave states a grade on “truth in advertising” about student proficiency, remarking on gaps between the number of students scoring in the top category on state assessments and the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

In Tennessee, where Ms. Horn was working at the time, the Chamber’s poor rating of the state served as a rallying cry, providing impetus for a host of activities in the state focused on improving the quality of a Tennessee education. The governor engaged business and higher education leaders on issues of college- and career-readiness. The state joined the American Diploma Project and adopted new standards and graduation requirements for math and English language arts. Newly aligned assessments will provide an honest measure of how well-prepared students are for college or a career. Doing this alone in the state has been very hard, she noted; working together with other states as partners would have been much easier.

With the Common Core Standards project, states are working in unison toward a common set of state-crafted standards for math and English language arts that reflect increasing expectations. The end result of this process will be an opportunity for states to compare their performance in a meaningful way through common assessments. The U.S. Department of Education will award \$350 million in two grants to consortia of states to develop new assessments to be implemented in the 2014-2015 school year.

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) consortium, facilitated by Achieve, Inc., is anchored in career- and college-readiness standards, with all participating states adopting common standards and assessments. Students will take parts of the computer-based assessment throughout the year as the material is covered. In this manner, information will be provided to students and teachers regularly to help promote good instruction through feedback. Moreover, assessments will feature more sophisticated elements and performance tasks to measure standards more effectively and support accountability policies. The multiple “through course” assessments are joined by end-of-course assessments to determine performance, with results delivered quickly enough to be counted as a component of a final grade.

Institutions of higher education are partners in this, with over 200 institutions across the 26 states in the consortium working alongside K-12 teams to develop the assessments, guide the long-term strategy and lay the groundwork for implementation. The end goal of this process is to help more students be better prepared for college entry and more likely to complete their certification or degree. Because of their involvement in the process, higher education partners will be able to use the tests as part of their placement process for students. This also should help bring higher education and K-12 closer together, breaking down the barriers between the two levels and creating a seamless transition from high school to post-secondary education.

Dr. Fabrizio’s Presentation

Dr. Fabrizio began by emphasizing that assessments are part of a larger system of accountability. In North Carolina, the state initiated statewide testing in the 1977-78 school year using the California Achievement Test. The first state end-of-course test (for Algebra) was instituted in

1985, with other end-of-course tests put in place in the years following. In the 1992-93 school year, the state began end-of-grade tests. In 1996, the North Carolina General Assembly adopted a statewide accountability program that, for the first time, provided school-based accountability, establishing the accountability system that is in place today. The system measures absolute performance (how did the students do?) and the growth of achievement (how much did individual students improve over previous measures?).

In 2008, the state board of education established a Blue Ribbon Commission on accountability and assessments which released a framework for change. The Department of Public Instruction's response to this blueprint resulted in the current accountability and curriculum reform effort. The Department is now moving, after 15 years, toward a new accountability system that calls for new essential standards and assessments. He noted that two unintended consequences of the No Child Left Behind Act were downward pressure on standards and the almost exclusive use of multiple choice tests (due to the quick turnaround they provide). Constructed responses and performance tasks, which the new North Carolina assessment system will favor, will require more time because of the human involvement on scoring, but should give a more thorough picture of student performance.

North Carolina is a governing member of the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium in the current competition for federal grant funds. The SMARTER Balanced approach places an emphasis on adaptive computer testing, in which students receive varying questions based on their responses to previous questions. This gives a fuller picture of a student's ability and achievement by zeroing in on areas of student knowledge and competence as well as on the gaps in understanding and skills. The system provides formative results (during the course of the school year), as well as benchmark and summative information. This gives teachers more information about student performance that, in turn, helps them improve classroom instruction. This computer-based option also allows the use of technology-enhanced items, such as virtual lab tests and videos, to provide a fuller range of assessments. Dr. Fabrizio noted that both consortia are looking at some form of computer-based approach, which will be more difficult to develop and involve considerable work to implement, but will effect a shift away from the existing paradigm of instruction as test preparation that plagues the current system.

There remain some significant issues and challenges to address for any new assessment system. Among these is the need to define what is meant by proficiency and college-readiness. Additionally, any new assessment system will most likely include, at least in part, online or computer-based elements, which pose significant infrastructure and maintenance demands as well as new security and privacy issues. Furthermore, while computer-based assessments can return results on some elements almost instantaneously, both consortia are investigating the kinds of constructed responses that will either require human scoring or the development of artificial intelligence to automate that process, something that will slow down the delivery of results.

As new assessments roll out, the level of pushback on the number of days spent on testing (already considerable) will likely rise, even though the tests actually be less disruptive and more integrated into the learning process. Furthermore, there will need to be a discussion of how to include alternative assessments, particularly in the use of growth models, where they are currently excluded. A final challenge will be managing comparability across states, particularly given the different accommodations states allow students with disabilities.

For this next generation of accountability and assessments to work, it will be necessary to reframe what teachers do and how they do it. The objective is not to measure regularly for the sake of measuring, but to ensure that instruction is effective. In so doing, schools will shift away from thinking about tests as end goals and move toward concentrating on what is done in the classroom. Finally, he concluded, moving to a next generation of assessments will involve investments from all states to make it a success.

II. Consideration of Policy Position

Representative Tommy Benton, Georgia, introduced a policy position regarding the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), urging the administration and Congress to support a reauthorization of the ESEA that respects the appropriate roles of federal, state and local governments. The policy position was passed unanimously by the Committee. Subsequently, it was adopted by the Southern Legislative Conference on Tuesday, August 3.

III. Election of Officers

The Nominating Committee, comprising Senator Alice Harden, Mississippi; Senator Jimmy Jeffress, Arkansas; and Senator Gerald Long, Louisiana, presented its recommendations for Committee chair and vice chair for 2010-2011. Representative Tommy Benton, Georgia, was nominated for chair of the Committee, and Senator Harry Blevins, Virginia, was nominated for vice chair of the Committee. The nominations were moved and seconded, and Representative Benton and Senator Blevins were elected by acclamation.

PROGRAM SESSION, AUGUST 2

I. Alignment and Persistence: Getting Student into (and out of) College

Terri Ward, Ph.D., Co-Director, Center for Educational Policy Research,
Department of Educational Methodology, Policy, and Leadership, College
of Education, University of Oregon

Vasti Torres, Ph.D., Director, Project on Academic Success, University of Indiana
Center for Postsecondary Research

Background

Aligning high school coursework with college and career-readiness skills has become a new focus for state and federal policy. Remediation at the college level has a tremendous cost for states and students alike and can contribute to students leaving school prior to attaining credentials or a degree. South Carolina has developed a project to closely align high school coursetaking and college expectations. And while entering college prepared to do college work is a part of the college persistence puzzle, there is ample evidence today that more is required. The United States, once a leader in college graduates per capita, has now fallen to fifth in the industrialized world for the percentage of our population with post-secondary credentials, and 12th in the industrialized world when only the youngest segment of the population is considered. The graduation rate for the United States has been stagnant for decades, even as the number of students entering college has grown to record numbers.

Dr. Ward's Presentation

Dr. Ward explained that the Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) released the first national set of college readiness standards in 2003. The standards were the result of a project that asked more than 400 faculty members at leading research universities what they expected from incoming students. The state of South Carolina, noting this project, invited the Center to collaborate on a statewide project to align high school and post-secondary education. This idea was at the heart of the Center's work, which includes helping create a seamless transition between high school and college, something that the current system of education in the United States makes extremely cumbersome.

According to Dr. Ward, the assumption in education is that, essentially, all students need to be capable of post-secondary training or more formal learning. The social and economic future of the next generation is dependent on the ability of U.S. schools to prepare many more students for college and careers. The problem is that the high school diploma is not designed to make students college and career ready, she observed. Currently, the goal of high school is college eligibility for some, not college- and career-readiness for all. The need is to make sure that all students have access to the same information and skills about success in school. This is particularly true when students transition to college and fail to thrive. Students who are the first generation in their family to get to college may not know how to access the resources available to help them succeed.

Educational instruction and assessment have assumed that "aptitude" is one's inherent ability to learn and has only one dimension. Evidence now suggests that aptitude is multi-dimensional and highly malleable. This means a high school education can and should develop students' cognitive capabilities. Research suggests these cognitive capabilities, or strategies, are as important as mastery of specific content knowledge and factual information. Students develop these cognitive strategies when they are regularly presented challenging and engaging curriculum, instruction and assessment.

College readiness and career readiness are similar but not the same. The definition of "ready" is a student who can succeed—without remediation—in credit-bearing general education courses or a two-year certificate program. Success is defined as being able to progress in the chosen program. High schools, therefore, do not need to sort students based on potential post-high school futures. The best curriculum for all students is one that contains challenging content that leads to the development of key cognitive strategies. Math skills, in particular, are a limitation for many students in college. Preparing students with the essential skills they need in high school will make it possible for students to meet the challenges of higher ed when they arrive at college.

Research points to four components of any program to ensure that every student is ready for college and career after high school: key cognitive strategies (critical thinking skills such as problem solving and interpretation); key content knowledge (including foundational information and "big ideas"); academic behaviors (including time management, study skills and self awareness); and contextual skills and awareness (including the skills needed to get into college, navigate financial aid and academic experiences).

When South Carolina contacted EPIC, the state was ranked lowest nationally on high school graduates, with 49 out of every 100 entering freshmen graduating on time, against an arguably unacceptably low national average of 68 out of every 100 entering freshmen. Of the 49 who do

graduate, only 29 will enter college and, of those, only 20 matriculate from their freshman to sophomore year, with only 13 graduating on time (the second lowest graduation rate in the country). Moreover, there was a clear connection between preparation and persistence, with 58 percent of students who place into all credit bearing courses upon entry graduating from college within eight years, compared to a rate of 17 percent for those students who place into at least one remediation course.

In 2005, the General Assembly passed the Education and Economic Development Act, which mandated that the state Commission on Higher Education study the content and rigor of high school coursework in order to provide a seamless pathway to postsecondary education, address agreements on articulation between school districts and higher education to facilitate these transitions, and recommend coursework for dual enrollment.

This mandate led to the South Carolina Course Alignment Project, of which the Paired Courses model is a component. The model establishes courses for the final years of high school and the first year of college that are intentionally designed to be taken together. This creates practices in the high school courses (assessments, assignments, rubrics) that connect with those in courses in higher education. Course design teams worked together in small groups to create these classes with the intention of introducing practices to students in high school that would reflect what would later be experienced in the first year of college. Through this process, higher education faculty have learned from high school teachers what it takes to make the transition between high school and college more seamless.

The EPIC project studied the K-16 system in South Carolina with an eye toward where there were gaps in alignment between secondary and post-secondary education and brought together stakeholders to support the project. The project identified college readiness standards that were consistent with state high school academic standards, which helped to create a common language to talk about the standards. The project next conducted an analysis of discrepancies between exit-level high school courses and entry level college courses in English, math, and science to see where the gaps and weaknesses were. The project then assembled faculty groups from high school, technical colleges, and four-year institutions in these content areas to develop these paired courses together.

The project is finishing its first year of pilot implementation with 32 implementers who taught the courses. Pilot implementers were partnered in regional clusters so that they would be able to work with each other throughout the process. College faculty members serve as resources, but they also are reaching out to high school teachers on how to support students in their courses. Feedback from the implementers indicates that the relationship with partners across institutional lines is extremely beneficial. Next year the project will recruit and train an additional 150 teachers to implement the project, with more formal expectations for partners to visit each other's classrooms to better understand conditions and expectations.

It took visionary leadership from South Carolina to take a legislative mandate and funding and implement a statewide project of this nature. The Paired Courses program is unique among state efforts to improve college and career readiness. The project pulled in key partners at the national and state level to ensure the process was of the highest quality, and keeps a close watch on preliminary outcomes in order to be ready to make any necessary modifications.

Dr. Torres' Presentation

Dr. Torres began by noting that, internationally, the United States ranks 5th in the percentage of the population with a college degree, and 12th in the percentage of 25 year olds to 34 year olds with college degrees, which indicates that we are losing ground fast in the college degree race. While international comparisons are important, the larger issue to consider is that employment prospects for the future are going to require more post-secondary education than our current citizenry has, which is a challenge to staying globally competitive. To be at the world standard, the United States must increase the graduation rate by 15 percentage points, to 55 percent of the population.

Dr. Torres noted that student variables explain a large portion of why a student graduates or not. If a school attracts a high proportion of middle class, high-achieving students, then it will have a high graduation rate because those students are prepared to succeed and are financially and otherwise ready for college. Unfortunately, only about 25 percent of college students fit this profile. The majority of college students are likely to attend commuter colleges, work while in college, and be the first generation in their family to go to college.

There is a great deal of attention paid to students who are highly qualified and those who are underprepared, but there is little attention paid to the students who are in the middle—the average student. This is unfortunate, as any ground that will be gained in graduation rates will largely be comprised of this middle-range student. Certainly, some of the work going on with aligning K-12 and higher education will help with this group of students.

The College Board recently released a national study on student retention practices that reviewed what colleges do to help students graduate. The report found that colleges do a great deal to help students persist, but only two of these activities seem to help. The first is a retention coordinator empowered to make programmatic changes. Very few institutions have retention coordinators with this authority, however. The second is the extensiveness of structures to improve retention of students of color, including those that support students in their transition to higher education (such as how to find student aid, academic resources, etc.).

It is important to acknowledge that not all students arrive at schools equally well-prepared. Not all school systems are funded equally, and the opportunities for students to be college-ready are fewer in some school districts than others. There is a strong correlation between a student's family socio-economic status and the student's readiness for college. Unfortunately, most of the students who are at risk (low-income, minority) of not being prepared for college upon entry attend commuter colleges, which also are not as strongly supported as flagship universities, which further exacerbates the risk of failure. The major research universities, by contrast, enroll students who are most prepared to succeed, creating a resource dichotomy where the greatest resources are available at institutions least in need of them with respect to college persistence.

A study on mobile students found that working students were earning money for necessities, and not luxury items. Chief among these was dependable transportation, in most places due in part to the absence of public transportation and the need to be able to reliably get to class and work. Moreover, the cost of attending is more than simply tuition, with books and increases in fees adding considerably to the total sum, which places further pressure on students already financially struggling.

Higher education policy is crafted for residential students pursuing a degree full-time at a four-year college, even though the reality is that there are large and increasing numbers of part-time students who must work in order to attend college and fulfill their family obligations. Financial aid policies discourage part-time course taking and employment, which places additional hurdles in front of students who must work. This creates a “recipe for failure” where students work 30 hours per week on top of a full load of classes, a combination found more typically among those students under 21.

Some general recommendations from Dr. Torres’ work, as well as from the College Board, are for an increase in need-based grant aid and a simplification of the financial aid process. The unmet need for students is rising, creating a gap between the amounts for which students qualify and what they need. Because expecting students not to work is unrealistic, aid policies should be reconsidered with respect to support for part-time students without penalizing them for income from paid labor. State legislatures have been working on keeping tuition affordable, but there has been little relief from fee increases and skyrocketing book costs.

Dr. Torres’ final recommendation was to consider an alternative to the graduation rate formula that does not penalize the institutions serving most students. The federal rate is based on first-time, full-time students in college, which means that transfer students count against their first institution as a dropout because they do not complete their program there, regardless if they transfer and complete elsewhere. This provides an advantage to flagship institutions at the disadvantage of technical and commuter colleges.

In concluding her remarks, Dr. Torres underscored that there is no single solution that will improve student persistence in college. It is something that must be attacked from a range of directions and at a variety of levels.

II. Southern Legislative Conference 65th Annual Meeting, Memphis, Tennessee

The SLC will meet for the 65th Annual Meeting in Memphis, Tennessee, July 16 – 20, 2011. In keeping with the wishes of the SLC presiding officers, please note that meeting notification does not authorize travel.

SLC Staff Contact

If you have any questions regarding this report or the 2010 SLC Annual Meeting, please contact Mr. Jonathan R. Watts Hull in the Atlanta office at 404/633-1866 or jhull@csg.org.

ATTENDANCE LIST

Southern Legislative Conference 64th Annual Meeting
Education Committee
July 31 - August 4, 2010
Charleston, South Carolina

(List reflects those attendees whose names appeared on the sign-in sheet)

ALABAMA

Senator Priscilla Dunn
Senator Rodger Smitherman

ARKANSAS

Senator Jimmy Jeffress
Senator Bill Pritchard
Representative Eddie Cheatham
Representative Clark Hall
Representative Eddie C. Hawkins
Representative Johnny Hoyt
Representative Gene Shelby
Kim Arnall, Bureau of Legislative Research
Ann Cornwell, Senate

GEORGIA

Representative Tommy Benton
Representative Tom Dickson
Representative Tom Dixon
Judith Costello, Canadian Consulate General
Jonathan R. Watts Hull, Southern Legislative
Conference
Mikko Lindberg, Southern Legislative Conference

INDIANA

Vasti Torres, University of Indiana

KENTUCKY

Representative Linda Belcher
Representative Larry Clark
Representative Dennis Horlander
Representative Dennis Keene
Representative Jody Richard
Representative Arnold Simpson
Representative Wilson L. Stone
Lourdes Baez-Schrader, Office of the Senate
President
Pam Goins, The Council of State Governments
Kyna Koch, Legislative Research Commission

LOUISIANA

Senator Edwin R. Murray

MISSISSIPPI

Senator Alice V. Harden

NORTH CAROLINA

Senator Kati G. Dorsett
Representative Linda Johnson
Representative Marvin Lucas
Representative Earline W. Parmon
Louis "Lou" Fabrizio, Department of Public
Instruction
Karen Garr, National Board for Professional
Teaching Standards
David Schock, Marine Corps Installations East

OREGON

Terri Ward, Center for Educational Policy
Research

SOUTH CAROLINA

Representative Joe Daning
Representative Dennis Moss
Representative Andy Patrick
Representative J. Roland Smith
Representative Bill Taylor
Representative Bill Wylie
Phillip Owens, South Carolina Board of
Education

TENNESSEE

Senator Dolores Gresham
Annette Crutchfield, Office of Legislative Budget
Analysis
Nathan James, Senate

TEXAS

Senator Jeff Wentworth

VIRGINIA

Senator Harry Blevins

Senator Henry L. Marsh, III

Delegate Bob Tata

Joseph Aguerrebere, National Board for

Professional Teaching Standards

Craig Thibaudeau, National Board for

Professional Teaching Standards

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Thad Daise, National Educators Association

Margaret Horn, Achieve, Inc.

Bob Wise, National Board for Professional

Teaching Standards

WEST VIRGINIA

Senator Jack Yost

Delegate Bob Beach

Delegate Tim Ennis

Delegate Ricky Moyer

Delegate Dave Pethtel

Aaron Allred, Joint Committee on Government

and Finance

Rich Olsen, Legislative Services

CANADA

June Dewetering, Canada-United States

Inter-Parliamentary Group