



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
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Closing the opportunity gap

Equal educational opportunity for all -- it was the basis of the lawsuit that triggered the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 and remains a basic tenet of the Kentucky Board of Education and Kentucky Department of Education today. A student's race, ethnic background, family income, unique challenge or zip code should not determine whether the child has access to a quality education. The sad reality is that in too many places it does.

This week I received a letter from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan outlining a new requirement for states to develop an [educator equity plan](#) to ensure every child has access to a quality education and quality educators. Here is an excerpt:

Equality of opportunity is a core American value. Equal educational opportunity means ensuring schools have the resources they need to provide real and meaningful opportunities for all students to succeed, regardless of family income or race. To accomplish this goal, students must have access to a safe and healthy place to learn, quality instructional materials and supports, rigorous expectations and course work, and, most critically, excellent educators to guide learning. Yet family income and race still too often predict how likely a child is to attend a school staffed by great educators. This inequity is unacceptable, and the time is now for us to work together to ensure all children have access to the high-quality education they deserve, and that all educators (including teachers, staff, principals, and superintendents) have the resources and support necessary to provide that education.

Over the past several months, the U.S. Department of Education (Department) has conducted outreach to Chief State School Officers, school districts, civil rights groups, teachers, principals, and other stakeholders to explore ways to tackle and resolve the disparities in access to great teachers that we know continue to exist. Through this outreach, we heard that there is no single solution to this problem; we need a broad and systemic focus on supporting and improving teaching and learning, especially in our highest-need schools and for our highest-need students, including students with disabilities and English learners. We heard that the best efforts will not only include recruiting, developing, and retaining great educators with the skills to teach all students, but will also build strong school leaders, create supportive working conditions, and address inequities in resources and supports for teachers.

Many of you have told me that you are ready for a renewed and deeper commitment to ensuring every student in every public school has equal access to great educators who set and maintain high expectations for every student.

To move us closer to this goal, the Department is embarking on a multifaceted strategy:

New State Educator Equity Plans: The Department will ask that, in April 2015, each State educational agency (SEA) submit to the Department a new State Educator Equity Plan in accordance with the requirements of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). As required by ESEA, in its plan, each SEA must, among other things, describe the steps it will take to ensure that "poor and minority children are not taught at higher rates than other children by inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers." To prepare a strong plan, each SEA will analyze what its stakeholders and data have to say about the root causes of inequities and will craft its own solutions.

The Department will issue guidance this fall to support SEAs in plan development and implementation. I look forward to working with you to ensure that these plans translate to meaningful and comprehensive change for students.

Secretary Duncan's letter goes on to say that USED will support the development of these plans by releasing data on current conditions. This will include:

(1) comprehensive school and district level data reported directly by districts to the Department on metrics such as teacher experience; teacher absenteeism; teacher certification; access to preschool and rigorous course work, including science, mathematics, and Advanced Placement courses; and school expenditures
(2) state-specific teacher equity profiles, which will also be available to the public on the Department's Web site.

In addition, USED will fund a new technical assistance network that will provide information, tools, and supports to all states as they develop and implement new State Educator Equity Plans.

In reality, Kentucky has developed similar state plans since 2006 for Title I and Title II. As the secretary acknowledges..."this is not the first time that states, districts, and the federal government have tried to grapple with the complex challenge of ensuring equitable access to excellent educators, but previous efforts have not fully addressed the challenge."

Certainly as we develop a new state plan in preparation for the April 2015 deadline, we will seek feedback from all stakeholders involved. With the dedication to doing what's best for children that our educators and other stakeholders regularly exhibit, I have no doubt that Kentucky will once again be a shining example for other states of equal educational opportunity for all.

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Commissioner