Theme II Policy Presentation: "High School Reform"
Monday, 12 noon – 1.30 pm
Centennial E

Presentation Description

Biographical Sketch: Ted Sanders

Lunch

Theme II Policy Presentation: "High School Reform"
Speaker: Ted Sanders, president, Education Commission of the States

The recently released report Raising Our Sights: No High School Senior Left Behind (called The Lost Opportunity of Senior Year in its preliminary form and available online at http://www.commissiononthesenioryear.org/) documents all too well how much of the senior year of high school is wasted by so many high school students. At a time when education is more important than ever and public resource constraints make it increasingly difficult to maintain broad access to high quality education, particularly at the postsecondary level, it makes sense to think about ways in which the high school experience and early college years can be coordinated more effectively. This can be accomplished, in part, through accelerated learning opportunities and through greater alignment of high school exit and college admission standards, both of which are being discussed at this meeting. During this session, Ted Sanders will discuss how the overall high school experience can be changed to make this time more productive to improve student performance. No one is better prepared to address this issue than Ted Sanders. He brings a wealth of experience at the elementary/secondary levels and the postsecondary education level, plus experience at the local, state, and federal levels. He has a particularly passionate interest in improving secondary education and will bring this experience and interest to our discussion of this issue.

Ted Sanders, president of the Education Commission of the States, has wide experience as an educator, including work as a classroom teacher, chief state school officer in three states, acting U.S. secretary of education (a cabinet post) and university president. Sanders joined ECS in February 2000; earlier he was president of Southern Illinois University for five years. From 1991-95, he was Ohio superintendent of public instruction, and from 1989 to 1991, he served as deputy U.S. secretary of education. Sanders served as Illinois state superintendent of education from 1985 to 1989, after having spent about six years in that position in Nevada. Earlier, he taught in the Mountain Home, ID, and Bureau of Indian Affairs public school systems, and worked for the New Mexico Dept. of Education. Among his numerous awards, Sanders hold honorary doctorates from Eastern Illinois University, Wayland Baptist University, the National College of Education and the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. He is the author of numerous articles, book chapters, guest editorials, and professional papers.
WASHINGTON, DC – October 4, 2001 – The problems of America’s high school seniors go deeper than the ‘senioritis’ that takes hold after college acceptance and require a comprehensive remedy involving all levels of education, from preschool to postsecondary education, according to the final report of the National Commission on the High School Senior Year released today.

A central tenet of the report, Raising Our Sights: No High School Senior Left Behind, is that new demands of the economy now require all U.S. students to take at least two additional years of formal education and training after high school. But today, high school is not preparing enough students for postsecondary learning or careers after college, and the United States is slipping behind other nations as the world leader in the percentage of young people who graduate from college. “Just 44 percent of our high school students take a demanding academic program; the other 30 million are being prepared for a future that has already vanished, in courses of study that lack rigor and coherence,” the report says.

To ensure that more students are ready for postsecondary education, schools must make a “college-preparatory-like” curriculum the default learning track for all, with states requiring that school districts obtain parental permission before assigning high school students to lower level courses. In addition, the nation must establish more (and more rigorous) alternatives to the traditional classroom-centered senior year, says the 29-member panel. (See attached listing of members.)

Recognizing that the senior year does not stand in isolation, the Commission’s recommendations are directed across the entire education system to make the culmination of high school more successful and productive. Investments in quality early childhood education and teacher preparation are as critical to raising student achievement as are offering more rigorous high school courses, the Commission believes.

Today, 18 states have P-16 Councils to increase student access to postsecondary education, improve student success, and align curriculum. Nonetheless, the Education Trust estimates that only 10 states have aligned high school graduation and college admission requirements in English and only two states have done so in math. More states need to introduce these councils and further expand efforts to better align standards for high school promotion and graduation, college admission and enrollment in courses, the Commission says.

“The nation must take a preschool to postsecondary approach to ensure that all students have the skills necessary to triumph at the next level of learning. Unless we create an aligned system and
ensure that all students have rigorous college-prep study, we will doom millions of young people to lower income and limited career options,” says Gov. Paul Patton (D-KY), the commission’s chair.

According to the report, women who drop out from high school can expect to earn, on average, $31,500 less per year less than women who earn graduate degrees. For men, the earnings gap is even larger – more than $50,000 a year.

“As the world of work becomes more complex and opportunities increasingly depend on one’s level of education, students shunted into non-academic tracks are being written off,” said Cheryl Kane, executive director of the Commission. “The Commission seeks to ensure that no high school senior will be left behind and that a high school diploma will once again become a mark of accomplishment, a sign that a graduate can enter college and the workforce with the skills and standards necessary to succeed from day one.”

**Permeable Boundaries, Better Alternatives**

To accomplish this, the Commission recommends that the nation create more permeable boundaries between high school, postsecondary education and the world of work to enable students to shift from learning to work and back again, according to their own readiness and needs. Those who can meet the standards for high school graduation in fewer than four years should be encouraged to do so, according to the Commission, while some students may need five years to finish. All students, however, should be provided with a "demanding array" of educational alternatives in high school. Besides dual enrollment in high school and college, this might mean service-learning opportunities, rigorous work-based learning (internships), or completing a "capstone" or research project. Ideally, every student would do all of these.

“These changes recognize that seniors are almost adults and make the senior year more of a transition to the worlds of college and work rather than yet another year behind bigger versions of the same desks they’ve sat in since first grade,” Kane said.

**Annual Learning Plans for All Students**

Besides implementing higher standards for student performance, the Commission urges more attention to the prior preparation, as well as the individual needs, of every student. Beginning in the middle school years, probably in grade 6, teachers, administrators, counselors, and students and parents should begin work on a formal "learning plan" for every student. This plan should be flexible and updated annually, the Commission states. And in order for these plans to serve as a tool to prepare students to reach their goals, teachers must know—and schools must adapt their courses and standards to reflect—what colleges and employers want and expect graduates to do.

By the time students reach high school they should be well on their way to meeting common standards required for graduation, although all entering students may not finish high school at the same time and in the same way. While standards should be rigorous enough to ensure that no high school senior is left behind, students should not be forced to march, lock step, through high school, if they are to master the skills required for further education and work.
KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Key recommendations are presented as part of the Commission’s “Triple A Plan”, which calls for increased alignment between all levels of education, higher achievement through college-preparatory study, and expanded and more rigorous alternatives to the traditional senior year, so students can explore options and prove their knowledge and skills through a capstone project, internship or other means.

ALIGNMENT

While more than 70 percent of today’s graduates continue on to postsecondary education, only half of those who enroll on a four-year campus leave with a degree, largely due to inadequate preparation in secondary school. Exams taken at one level are largely ignored at the next, and postsecondary institutions frequently admit students without the background to handle college-level work as high school graduation requirements are not tied to college admissions standards. Moreover, college admissions tests – the SAT and ACT – are not aligned with new higher state and national standards. At the same time, the colleges that prepare the next generation of teachers have not kept up with the new reforms sweeping K-12 schools.

To address these challenges, the report recommends the creation of a seamless “P-16” system, from preschool to postsecondary education, in which standards, curriculum and assessment efforts are aligned and integrated. The report specifically urges the creation of state P-16 councils to increase student access to (and success in) postsecondary education by creating significant and systematic linkages between the different levels of education and aligning standards together. It also would address teacher standards, recruitment, and training. This would raise the sights of everyone at every level of the system to take into account new requirements, challenges, and expectations. Already 24 states have begun work on such a “seamless system.” Maryland, Georgia, and Oregon are among the most widely acclaimed models of the 18 states that have an aligned “P-16” system.

ACHIEVEMENT

American high schools prepare too few students to master the unknown future. While 90 percent of freshmen say they expect to complete college, only about two in five (44 percent) take the college preparatory curriculum that equips them for high achievement. High schools traditionally act as sorting machines, rationing top-level academics like a limited resource and determining who will receive the knowledge necessary for success. Fewer than half of teachers (38 percent) say that helping all students prepare for college is very important. What President Bush calls “the soft bigotry of low expectations” devastates the life chances of students who “receive algebra without equations, science without laboratories, and literature without reading.” Yet high schools (and parents and students) wrongly continue to act as though making it through the weaker “general studies” curriculum provides sufficient preparation for college or work.

To address these challenges, the Commission urges states to require schools to give all students “college-preparatory” courses as the default, establish a demanding and rigorous curriculum, ensure that elementary and middle schools prepare their graduates for demanding work on the next level, and improve teacher training institutions to prepare their graduates to teach all children to meet these higher standards. State P-16 councils can increase awareness about the need for education beyond high school and the importance of reshaping high school from an institution that sorts
students into one that helps all of them succeed. At the same time, they must provide additional support to those at risk of not succeeding in demanding courses and a formal “learning plan” for what each student hopes to accomplish.

ALTERNATIVES

Many seniors find their last year boring and repetitious, especially once they have been accepted into college, the goal for which they had worked throughout school. Education’s new emphasis on standards and accountability provides an opportunity to replace “seat time” in the senior year with more demanding options. The report says, “Educators should work to provide the widest possible array of demanding educational alternatives for all students” ranging from vocational internships to enrolling in college courses.

The Commission recommends that young people finish school at their own pace, moving on as they complete required standards including a portfolio of work and a “capstone” senior project. This would help solve the problem of duplication that leads high schools to offer college-level Advanced Placement courses while colleges offer basic secondary-level remedial courses. It also recommends that state and local educators reshape the senior year around sound alternative paths to provide credit toward graduation and ease students’ transition from high school to college and work. Flexible use of time should greatly expand the opportunities for high school students to experience the challenges of college-level work while providing options for service- and work-based learning for credit. In the process, schools should connect students to adults who can help them explore their options.