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Editor's Note

How are charter school authorizers like guardrails on our public highways? Find out in this month's feature on the critical role that authorizers play in ensuring the success of new charter schools. Also this month, we continue the addition of a "Special Report" at the top of the "What's New?" section – this time to observe April as Financial Literacy Month and to focus on some noteworthy efforts under OII's Excellence in Economic Education grant program to achieve the goals of Financial Literacy Month year-round.

Feature

Authorizers are Critical to Putting New Charters on the Road to Success

During this year's [Charter School Week](#), May 2-8, the charter school sector would be well served to adopt the posture of the Roman god Janus, simultaneously looking both to the past and the future: The past up to the present to acknowledge and celebrate the sector's growth over almost two decades; and the present to future in order to take stock of recent studies of student achievement in charter schools compared with traditional public schools and to chart a course for the future – a future with the promise of growth but the challenge to increase not only in quantity but in quality as well.

Nearly 5,000 charter schools now exist in 40 states and the District of Columbia, and represent five percent of U.S. public schools, serving three percent of public school students. Charters have been supported by Administrations of both parties since they were first created in 1992 for their promise of bringing a new source of innovation, choice, and entrepreneurial solutions toward the goal of providing all students with a quality education. Indeed, President Obama is committed to doubling the federal support for charter schools over the next four years, and is proposing to make his investment further reach that commitment by increasing funds for charter schools for Fiscal Year 2011.

The prospective role of public charters has also gained a heightened profile as the Department of Education has included new charter start-ups as one of four intervention models under the historic investment of \$3.5 billion in Title I [School Improvement Grants](#) (SIG) under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). This opportunity is coupled with the potential for increases in charters in

situations other than low-performing-school turnarounds as many states have relaxed caps on the number of charter schools permitted to operate or have taken other measures to level the playing field between charters and traditional public schools.

Whether new charter schools serve as turnaround interventions or as new school options, state and local leaders must ask tough questions about how to increase the likelihood of success for new charters. These questions have become increasingly urgent as recent studies have failed to show that charter schools broadly outperform their district peers. A 2009 [study](#) by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University provided sobering data concerning charter schools performance nationally, concluding that charters on the whole did not outperform district schools. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, in his [remarks](#) at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) conference last June, acknowledged the CREDO report's findings of minimal accountability in several states.

Authorizers Play a Critical Role

Before the doors of a new charter are opened, critical “upstream” decisions must be made: How will the best-qualified applicants be screened and selected? What assistance could be given to new operators, particularly in the initial start-up year? How should a balance be struck between encouraging innovation and demanding approaches that are research-based? What accountability structures are needed to increase charter schools’ student achievement and operational soundness?

These critical questions, as well as others that come “downstream,” fall squarely at the feet of charter school authorizers – those organizations charged with approving the creation of new charter schools, overseeing those charters, and determining which charters should close for having not lived up to the commitments they initially made. Each state has its own approach to authorizing. In some cases school districts are authorizers, in some cases authorizers are universities or other nonprofits. But no matter what the structure, how well authorizers carry out their oversight responsibilities can significantly impact the health and quality of the charter schools they oversee.

Recognizing this critical role, The [National Association of Charter School Authorizers](#) (NACSA) has established “[Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing](#).” The Standards cover five areas, from defining the qualities of an authorizer’s own organizational capacities to the rigor and transparency of the renewal decisions authorizers make. According to NACSA, authorizers who implement practices that meet these standards are more likely to have quality charter schools.

By not adhering to the standards, particularly those affecting accountability, the “charter movement is putting itself at risk” by allowing too many second- and third-rate charter schools to continue to exist, Secretary Duncan observed in his remarks at the NAPCS conference last year. “Charter authorizers should do a better job of holding schools accountable,” the Secretary observed, and charter schools must support their authorizers – “loudly and sincerely.”

“Without strong authorizer practices in place, a school drifting off course quickly becomes a disaster for its students, parents and the public.”

— Greg Richmond, NACSA executive director

In testimony before the Congress earlier this year, NACSA’s president and CEO, Greg Richmond, likened authorizers to the guardrails of the charter sector. He cited a NACSA survey that pointed to challenges for the authorizing community in achieving the principles and standards. Thirteen percent of authorizers, for instance, do not conduct an in-person interview with organizations applying for a new charter. One-quarter of them reported having no present guidelines for making renewal decisions, and 20 percent do not apply consistent academic standards across the charters they

oversee. Extending his metaphor, Richmond noted, “Without strong authorizer practices in place, a school drifting off course quickly becomes a disaster for its students, parents, and the public.”

The entire charter schools community has come to recognize the essentialness of quality authorizing. The National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, the voice for the national charter sector, lists quality authorizing high in its [Model Public Charter School Law](#) that it recommends states adopt. The Model Law specifically calls for all authorizers to “develop and maintain chartering policies and practices consistent with nationally recognized principles and standards for quality charter authorizing in all major areas of authorizing responsibility,” ... and to carry out all their duties “in a manner consistent with such nationally recognized principles and standards.”

The Type of Authorizer Can Make a Difference

The CREDO study, however, offers more than just bad news. In its look at the performance of charter schools across the nation, it found that students do better in charter schools over time. According to the study’s findings, first-year charter students on average experience a decline in learning, possibly owing to “a combination of mobility effects and the experience of a charter school in its early years.” In the second and

third years in charter schools, however, the findings indicate “a significant reversal to positive gains.”

Moreover, the CREDO study for the first time provided evidence to support what most have long believed: that charter schools differences in student performance were associated with the type of authorizers overseeing the schools. Looking at charter schools in New York City, where charters are overseen by one of three different authorizers, CREDO found that students in charters under the oversight of the [State University of New York](#) (SUNY) Charter Schools Institute (CSI) had [outperformed](#) students in charters overseen by the New York City Department of Education, which in turn substantially outperformed students in charters overseen by the New York State Department of Education. On the 2008-09 state exams in English language arts, 80 percent of students in SUNY authorized charter schools scored at or above proficiency, compared to 75 percent of students in non-SUNY charters and 77 percent of students in all public schools – charter and non-charter – statewide. Similarly in mathematics for 2008-09, 92 percent of students in grades three through eight in SUNY authorized schools scored at or above proficiency on the state mathematics assessment; the rates for non-SUNY charter schools and all public schools were 89 and 86 percent, respectively.

But despite these results, a quality authorizer such as SUNY is struggling this spring as K-12 education budgets for 2010-1011 are being formulated in state capitals. Current legislative proposals are calling for substantial reductions in SUNY’s \$2.4 million operating budget. The proposed reduction would set back SUNY’s plans to develop stronger tools with which its charter schools could improve their services to special education students and English language learners, according to CSI executive director Jonas Chartock.

Getting Ready for Success in Michigan

Since it became the first public body in Michigan and the first university nationally to charter a public school, [Central Michigan University](#) (CMU) has not only grown to currently oversee 58 schools in Michigan, but to be highly regarded throughout the country for its policies and procedures. “CMU’s relentless pursuit of excellence,” according to NACSA’s Greg Richmond, “is helping raise the quality bar for the entire charter movement.”

One of the significant ways that CMU assists new charters is to begin “upstream,” providing the schools’ administrators and teachers with an assessment tool, the [Scantron® Performance Series™](#), an online, computer-adaptive test that evaluates how much growth each student is achieving in a school year and compares students against a national pool. Teachers can log in and see student scores the minute the tests are completed, providing them with immediate guidance to make real data-driven decisions about how to help their students. It also empowers the school’s leaders to be able to decide where to direct resources and support within the building.

On an on-going basis for all of its schools, CMU has pioneered several systems designed to reduce red tape and ease the administrative burdens of compliance with state and federal regulations. The challenge for CMU was to not only develop sound oversight practices, but to allow and account for future growth in the number of schools it would oversee. Since its start in 2001, CMU’s Web-based [Authorizer Oversight Information System](#) (AOIS) has streamlined and automated the regulatory reporting process for CMU’s charter schools. The goal, then and now, was to provide school leaders with more time to spend with students, putting “the regulatory reporting on auto pilot,” according to Goenner. AOIS has been adopted not only by other charter authorizers but by traditional public schools nationwide.

Efforts by CMU to strike the needed balance between helping the charter schools it oversees and respecting their needed autonomy have had and continue to produce success. In the latest ranking of the top 25 school districts in Michigan, based on the 2009 Michigan Educational Assessment Program, five charters authorized by CMU were in the top 10, including the school in the No. 1 position in the ranking.

CMU has also pioneered strategies and methods, such as the Scantron testing series, that have been adopted by other authorizers both in and outside of Michigan. Its institute provides training sessions nationally and publishes its research and best practices. CMU staff has written two nationally acclaimed

books on universities as charter authorizers and on strategic planning for charter schools. Recently the Michigan Department of Education referred to CMU as “the gold standard in public school academy accountability.”

Looking to the Future

As states plan for a new era of charter school growth, and as they consider working with charters on their school turnarounds, it is critical that they study lessons learned from research about achievement and the factors that contribute to it in the relationships between authorizers and charters.

Key Resources

- [National Association of Charter School Authorizers](#)
- [NACSA's Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing \(2009\)](#)
- [The State of Charter School Authorizing 2008: A Report on NACSA's Authorizer Survey](#)
- [Charter School Authorizer Funding Policy Guide](#)
- [Supporting Charter School Excellence Through Quality Authorizing](#)
- [Finding a Balance: How Application and Authorization Policies Impact School Supply](#)
- [Holding Charter Authorizers Accountable: Why It Is Important and How It Might Be Done](#)
- [15 Years of Transforming Public Education: Celebrating 15 Years of the Center for Charter Schools at Central Michigan University](#)
- [A Framework for Operational Quality: A Report from the National Consensus Panel on Charter School Operational Quality](#)

What's New ?

Special Report: Focus on Financial Literacy

While Americans celebrate a number of things in April, financial literacy continues to increase in both importance and the public's awareness because of the recent economic conditions affecting families and students. In [proclaiming](#) April as [Financial Literacy Month](#), President Obama noted that America's “future prosperity depends on the financial security of all Americans,” urging Americans to “take time to improve our own financial knowledge and share that knowledge with our children.”

The Department of Education's [Excellence in Economic Education](#) (EEE) grant program promotes financial literacy among K-12 students through a grant to a national nonprofit educational organization. The aim is to improve student understanding in economics and personal finance.

The [Mississippi Council on Economic Education](#) (MCEE), a subgrantee of the EEE program, provides professional development in economic education to K-12 teachers in disadvantaged school districts so that students can become financially literate by high school graduation. Teachers put their new skills to use through activities such as the Mississippi [Stock Market Game](#), a student competition that introduces business world concepts through interactive learning. Teachers learn how to integrate financial and economic concepts into the core curriculum while students invest imaginary money and track its progress. The Mississippi Economics and Personal Financial Challenge for middle and high school students culminates with quarterly online semifinal competitions leading up to the annual state finals.

The 2007 Mississippi Economics Student of the Year, Joe Davis, discovered that he really liked economics, so much so that he majored in the subject at Mississippi State University, where he's a junior. “I realized I had a talent, and I figured that I might as well pursue something that I am good at,” he said. He is expecting to use the reasoning skills he gained in economics classes to help him in law school.

Mississippi's Senators Thad Cochran (R) and Roger Wicker (R) authored Senate Resolution 485, establishing April 2010 as “Financial Literacy Month,” which passed by unanimous consent. “I am pleased that more Mississippi schools are promoting financial literacy and hope that all our residents will use Financial Literacy Month to understand how to improve their management of credit, debt, and savings,” Senator Cochran said in the Senate news release. The designation of April as Financial Literacy Month also

puts a particular focus on the need for financial literacy in schools, according to Senator Wicker, who noted that "...we can further emphasize financial literacy and good money management skills in students' curriculum as well in outreach activities for individuals of all ages."

Economics and financial literacy are part of the Effective Teaching and Learning for a Well-Rounded Education in President Obama's FY 2011 Budget proposal and the [Blueprint for Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act](#).

From the U.S. Department of Education

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, in [testimony](#) before Congress on the Department's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2011, began his remarks by drawing members' attention to the looming financial shortfall facing states and school districts. "Every day brings reports of layoffs, program cuts, class time reductions, and class size increases." Potentially hundreds of thousands of educators and other personnel could be laid off if action is not taken quickly to help states and districts cover shortfalls. The Secretary urged members to consider another round of emergency support for America's schools, similar to the aid provided to states through the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act*. (April 2010)

Secretary Duncan joined National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Rocco Landesman to address the spring forum of the [Arts Education Partnership](#) on the importance of a well-rounded education and, within it, the importance of arts education. "The arts can no longer be treated as a frill," Secretary Duncan began his [remarks](#), citing research findings that evidence increases in academic achievement and high school graduation rates as well as decreases in discipline problems. This arts education audience also learned that the Secretary played drums in middle school and was introduced to a wide range of musical genres by his father, a college professor and banjo player who was very involved in the university's annual folk music festival. (April 2010)



Secretary of Education Duncan with members of the Arts Education Partnership Governance Committee (left to right): Gene Wilhoit, Council of Chief State School Officers; Secretary Duncan; Sandra Ruppert, AEP executive director; Jonathan Katz, National Assembly of State Arts Agencies; and NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman.

NEA Chairman Landesman [affirmed](#) his agency's interest in strong K-12 arts education programs, describing the best arts education as "offered by a combination of classroom teachers, art specialists, teaching artists, and art and community organizations working together with students and families." (April 2010)

The [Nation's Report Card: Reading 2009](#) details the achievement of fourth- and eighth-grade students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), administered by the Department last year. The report compares national and state results in 2009 with every prior assessment year back to 1992. Fourth-graders showed no overall increase at the national level since 2007, though scores were significantly higher in 2009 than 1992. Among eighth-graders, scores were higher when compared to both 1992 and 2007. (March 2010)

From the Office of Innovation and Improvement

The deadline for applications to the Investing in Innovation (i3) Fund is May 11. Interested applicants may want to access information from three [pre-application workshops](#) that occurred last month. The purpose of these workshops was to offer technical assistance to interested applicants for the scale-up, validation, and development grants. More than 1,000 attendees participated in the workshops, and over 2,000 attendees participated remotely through the webinars. (April 2010)

Twelve new five-year Teacher Quality Partnership grants, totaling \$99.8 million, intended to raise student achievement by improving instruction in our nation's schools, were [announced](#) by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. The grants, funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, will be used to reform traditional university teacher preparation programs as well as create teacher residency programs for professionals from other fields entering the teaching profession. "These grants will strengthen teacher

preparation and residency programs to ensure that new teachers, whether entering from college or from other careers, have the skills to boost student learning and be highly effective in today's diverse and challenging classrooms," Duncan said. (March 2010)

From the Institute of Education Sciences

The "[Digest of Education Statistics, 2009](#)," from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), part of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), is the 45th in a series of publications initiated in 1962. Its primary purpose is to provide a compilation of statistical information covering the broad field of American education – from pre-kindergarten through graduate school – drawn from government and private sources, but especially from surveys and other activities led by NCES. The digest contains data on the number of schools, students, and teachers, as well as statistics on educational attainment, finances, libraries, technology, and international comparisons. (April 2010)

The Request for Applications for 84.305A has been revised to include a new research topic, Analysis of Longitudinal Data to Support State and Local Education Reform. Under this [new research program](#), IES will support collaborations between researchers and state and local education agencies to analyze state and local longitudinal data and identify factors associated with better education outcomes. (April 2010)

"[Alternative Schools and Programs for Public School Students](#)," a report from the National Center for Educational Statistics, presents data from a recent survey about alternative schools and programs available to students during the 2007-08 year. (March 2010)

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

Secretary Duncan announced that Delaware and Tennessee had won [grants in Phase 1](#) of the Race to the Top competition. "We received many strong proposals from states all across America, but two applications stood out above all others," he explained. "Both states have statewide buy-in for comprehensive plans to reform their schools. They have written laws to support their policies. And, they have demonstrated the courage, capacity, and commitment to turn their ideas into practices that can improve outcomes for students." The Secretary [elaborated](#) further on reasons for the two states' winning applications in a Department blog. Delaware will receive approximately \$100 million, and Tennessee will receive approximately \$500 million. That means the Department will have about \$3.4 billion available for Phase 2 of the Race to the Top competition. (March 2010)

Five more states (Indiana, Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio, and Washington) have received funding under the \$3.5 billion [School Improvement Grants](#) (SIG) program. These funds are distributed by formula to the state and then competed out by the state to districts. For a district to apply for funding, it must have a state-identified, "persistently lowest achieving" school or a so-called Tier III school (which has failed to make adequate progress for two years but is not identified as a persistently lowest achieving school). The Department of Education has produced a new series of [videos](#) that illustrate how several school districts have successfully turned around low-performing schools using the four models endorsed by the Department's Title I School Improvement Grant program. (April 2010)

According to a new [analysis](#) by the Center on Reinventing Public Education, in paying for more than 342,000 jobs – or 5.5 percent of total teaching jobs nationally – ARRA money "mitigated what might otherwise have been a much steeper job decline." (March 2010)

American History

The History channel is working with the President's [Committee on the Arts and the Humanities](#) to offer college scholarships as part of a nationwide educational outreach in conjunction with the April premiere of "[America: The Story of Us](#)." Billed as the network's most expensive project ever, the 12-part series (to be shown over six nights) uses either live action or animation to recreate many of the events that it examines. The channel's partnership with the President's Committee makes \$25,000 in scholarships available to students creating a video presentation of how their personal stories link with American

history. Another \$25,000 will be offered to teachers who offer innovative lesson plans in American history. (April 2010)

Arts Education

For the ninth year, April was celebrated nationally as [Jazz Appreciation Month](#) (JAM). The U.S. Department of Education again joined forces with more than 25 governmental and cultural organizations in supporting this initiative. The celebration draws national attention to the significance of jazz as both a historical and living treasure. For the Department of Education's role, more than 16,000 public middle schools received a [letter](#) and colorful [JAM poster](#) from OII Assistant Deputy Secretary Jim Shelton. The letter encouraged principals to display the poster in a prominent school location and take advantage of the many educational opportunities surrounding the celebration of this uniquely American art form. (April 2010)

MetLife Foundation and the National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts have announced the renewal of the MetLife Foundation [Partners in Arts Education Program](#). The national initiative, now in its sixth year, aims to improve teaching and learning in the arts by supporting and promoting sustainable partnerships between community arts education organizations and public schools. Grants of up to \$20,000 will be awarded to support arts education partnerships during the 2010-2011 school year. Currently, more than 11,500 students in eight cities are receiving yearlong arts instruction thanks to 14 partnerships funded by the Partners in Arts Education Program. Grants are restricted to the 33 cities listed in the guidelines, and the application deadline is May 26, 2010. (March 2010)

Raising Student Achievement

Students displaced by Hurricane Katrina who relocated to Texas have made academic gains and are performing slightly better than a demographically and economically matched set of Texas students, according to a [report](#) from the Texas Education Agency. Following Katrina, more than 46,000 students from Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida enrolled in Texas public schools. The study looked at Katrina students who were in grades 3, 5, and 8 in 2006, and still enrolled in Texas schools in 2009, comparing them to students enrolled in Texas schools who matched the group on the bases of gender, ethnicity, economic background, and by geographic region. (April 2010)

The ninth edition of "[Beating the Odds](#)," from the Council of the Great City Schools, examines the academic progress of 65 urban school systems in 37 states and the District of Columbia, with measurable gains from 2006 to 2009 in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math on state assessments. (March 2010)

School Improvement

The five [finalist school districts](#) for the 2010 [Broad Prize for Urban Education](#) are Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina; Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia; Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland; and Socorro Independent School District and Ysleta Independent School district, both in El Paso, Texas. The Broad Prize annually honors a large urban district doing the most to improve student achievement. Monetary awards to the winning district and four finalists support college scholarships. (April 2010)

The University of Northern Iowa's Malcolm Price Laboratory School (PLS) in Cedar Falls, Iowa, is the [winner](#) of ASCD's first-ever Vision in Action: The ASCD Whole Child Award. ASCD honored Price Laboratory School today at its Annual Conference and Exhibit Show in San Antonio, Texas. The award recognizes schools that move beyond a narrow focus on academic achievement to take action for the whole child, creating learners who are knowledgeable, emotionally and physically healthy, civically active, artistically engaged, prepared for economic self-sufficiency, and ready for the world beyond formal schooling. (March 2010)

Technology in Education

The Federal Communications Commission's [released](#) its "Children's Agenda for Digital Opportunity" as part of the FCC's new Broadband Plan to Congress. "Children are our most precious national resource," said FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski in announcing the new Agenda. "We must do everything we can to educate and prepare them to thrive in the 21st century, and keep them safe." The FCC will hold a series of workshops and roundtables to further the Commission's children's agenda. (March 2010)

The Internet is a learning opportunity, not a problem, was the [message](#) Don Tapscott, best-selling author of *Grown Up Digital*, brought to educators at ASCD's recent annual conference. We need to embrace the profound generational differences between students today and teachers. "We are creating a generation that is thinking differently from every generation before," he said. Students today are doing more than multitasking; they have much better abilities to code-switch, according to Tapscott. He urged educators to disable the firewalls erected between them and their students and to "embrace a culture of collaboration, integration, and self-organization." (March 2010)

Innovations in the News

Charters/Choice

Jefferson Parish in New Orleans, La., is making final plans to open its second charter school, the Jefferson Chamber Foundation Academy, in August. The new school, which will be housed at the Louisiana Technical College campus, will open with 80 students and expects to double that number in five years. Using a self-paced, computer-based curriculum and opportunities for service learning and dual-enrollment classes at the Technical College, the school will serve students at-risk of dropping out. The Jefferson Parish public school system has a 10-percent dropout rate, three percent higher than the state average. [More—[The Times-Picayune \(New Orleans\)](#)] (March 30)

Propel McKeesport charter school in Pittsburgh, Pa., where a "no excuses" motto is on walls as well as t-shirts, is the top winner in a national competition sponsored by New Leaders for New Schools' Effective Practice Incentive Community initiative. Propel's motto captures the philosophy and spirit of the school where last year 100 percent of its 385 students in grades five and six scored proficient or advanced in math. The Gold Gain award from the Effective Practice Incentive Community carries with it both a \$100,000 cash prize that will be divided among the staff and a chance to share its best practices with other schools. [More—[Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#)] (March 25)

Leadership

The Web portal of New Leaders for New Schools' Effective Practice Incentive Community (EPIC) initiative has expanded its contents to include effective leader and teacher practices from the third cohort of low-income schools where New Leaders has principal-in-training programs. The EPIC portal was launched in 2008 and is featuring results from the initiative's activities in four major cities, as well as a consortium of charter schools in 20 states and D.C. EPIC has awarded funds to teachers and schools in high-poverty areas making strong student-achievement gains. Funding for the effort comes in part from the federal Teacher Incentive Fund. [More—[Education Week](#)] (March 25) (*premium article access compliments of EdWeek.org*)

Leadership was the focus of the 2010 American Association of School Administrators' National Conference, where members heard from nationally recognized innovators such as Harlem Children's Zone CEO Geoffrey Canada and a local superintendent that was named the National Superintendent of the Year. Betty Morgan has led the Washington County, Md., district since 2001, and the district has achieved Adequate Yearly Progress in all schools and in all areas under her leadership. "Good superintendents are folks who understand people," said Dr. Morgan, and they also have emotional intelligence and know how to "put people in the right jobs so they can be maximized." [More—[eSchool News](#)] (March 17)

An award-winning principal in Maine, Mike McCarthy, shares 10 ideas he's learned over his 30-year time as

a school building leader. Number one: “If you start making decisions based on avoiding conflict, the students lose.” Number nine: Consensus is overrated. “Twenty percent of people will be against anything,” McCarthy asserts. By realizing this, “you avoid comprising what really should be done because you stop watering things down.” [More—[Edutopia magazine](#)] (April 2010)

School Improvement

Two Dallas magnet schools were ranked No. 1 and 2 for the second year by Children at Risk, a Houston-based nonprofit group that rates Texas high schools using 14 measures that include test scores, graduation rates, and the percentage of students taking rigorous classes. The School of Science & Engineering and School of the Talented & Gifted were at the top of the ranking. [More—[The Dallas Morning News](#)] (April 4)

STEM

STEM research projects in 15 Los Angeles-area schools are getting an infusion of funds from Chevron, as the company provided \$1 million in grants to several South Bay school districts. Projects that will be undertaken by students and teachers include a rainwater filtration project at Environmental Charter High School in Lawndale, conversion of a wood shop into an engineering lab at El Segundo High School, and a new communications center at the Da Vinci Schools in Wiseburn. School officials said the funds will help students better contemplate career options in the science and technology fields. [More—[Los Angeles Daily Breeze](#)] (April 9)

Teacher Quality and Development

The Chicago Public Schools are testing a new teacher-evaluation tool, Excellence in Teaching, in 100 schools, hoping to “... shift the conversation from opinion, judgment and surface-level conversations around a checklist to deeper-level conversation,” according to Sheri Frost Leo of the Chicago Public Schools’ Office of Human Capital. The new program is intended to define both good and bad teaching, offer a common language for principals and teachers to use to discuss needed improvements, and demand evidence when grading teachers against criteria in 22 categories. [More—[The New York Times/Chicago News Cooperative](#)] (April 8) (free registration)

While *Innovator* readers are likely to have heard about the passing of Jaime Escalante last month, some may not know that Jay Matthews, while a young Los Angeles bureau chief for *The Washington Post* in the early 1980s, not only covered Mr. Escalante’s extraordinary career at Garfield High School, but authored the 1988 book, “Escalante: The Best Teacher in America,” which of course became the movie “Stand and Deliver.” Mr. Matthews’s longstanding, firsthand admiration for what Jaime Escalante achieved makes his tribute published in The Washington Post especially worth reading. [More—The [Washington Post](#)] (March 31)

With no less than four national surveys of teachers recently completed, the Mae West line, “I’d rather be looked over than overlooked,” comes to mind. Among the national entities gathering input on teachers’ perceptions of their profession and working conditions are the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the New Teacher Center, and MetLife. According to Education Week, the surveys’ findings concerning “what teachers say they need to be successful are remarkably consistent from instrument to instrument.” [More—[Education Week](#)] (March 31) (*premium article access compliments of EdWeek.org*)

First-year teachers, you have a reality television show about you, featuring actor Tony Danza experiencing what it’s like to teach English at an urban high school. The show, “Teach,” is filmed at Northeast High School in Philadelphia. Six months into the job, Danza says he enjoys it, but admits to it being “tougher than he ever imagined...” At the end of his first week, Danza said he “felt like calling every teacher he’d ever had and apologizing” because he “just didn’t get how difficult their jobs were.” [More—The [Los Angeles Times](#)] (March 31)

School leaders in Greenwich, Conn., are about to create an “A-Team” of “power subs” to respond to local parent concerns that students stand to lose ground when their regular teachers are absent. The district’s

parent concerns that students stand to lose ground when their regular teachers are absent. The district's deputy superintendent and its math and language arts program administrators are asking elementary principals for their most dependable substitutes, who will be trained this summer to increase their grasp of the elementary math and literacy curricula, and also how to use classroom technology. In the pilot year, school administrators who use the "power subs" will provide feedback to help determine if the program is working. [More—[The Greenwich \(CT\) Time](#)] (March 29)

Technology in Education

"Take out your iPod Touch students, and let's see how we're doing on our reading." This is a likely refrain in the elementary classrooms of the Salem-Keizer School District in Oregon, thanks to federal stimulus dollars for low-income and special education students. The district purchased 775 iPod Touches, software, and accessories for the elementary reading assessment. Classroom assessment results are synchronized to central office computers through wireless connections, allowing school and district leaders to view the aggregated data. The \$216,500 purchase of the iPods and related equipment is less than 1 percent of the total stimulus funds received by the district. [More—[Statesman-Journal \(Salem, Ore.\)](#)] (March 31) (free registration)

Students throughout Oregon may soon be able to take online classes based on a statewide cyber-school plan being developed by the state's 20 Education Service Districts (ESDs). ESD leaders cite a pressing need for statewide coordination of online learning, and delivering it to the state's 197 school districts by adding it to the existing set of services ESDs provide will be more efficient and less costly. The prospective cyber courses in an ESD-based delivery system will give parents another option in addition to Oregon's three online charter schools. [More—[The Oregonian](#)] (March 29)

The realization that Smartphone technology is increasingly a part of children's life outside of the classroom and needs to find its way into the classroom is attracting increasing funds from both public and private sources. "Young kids and multisensor-touch computing are a huge area of innovation," according to Phoenix Wang, who heads Startl, a new philanthropic venture fund supported by the Gates, MacArthur, and Hewlett foundations. Beyond Smartphones themselves, other handheld devices, such as the TeacherMate, are "... drawing on (students') innate hunger to seize learning with both hands and push all the right buttons." [More—[Fast Company](#)] (April 2010)

Penn State University and PBS are partners in a groundbreaking effort to give both teachers and students across Pennsylvania free access to high-quality curriculum materials. The Digital Learning Library (DLL) is the first state-based initiative to spring from an education technology initiative of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Council of State School Officers that aims to create DLLs aligned with state standards. According to Pennsylvania's secretary of education, Gerald Zahorchak, a current focus on assessment needs an equally strong curriculum framework, for which the best materials and resources are critical. "That's why we decided on this partnership," said Zahorchak. [More—[eSchool News](#)] (March 24) (free registration)

The TeacherMate, the creation of Seth Weinberger of Innovations for Learning, is in use by more than 40,000 students in 15 states. Weinberger is particularly enthusiastic about the device's potential for the youngest learners, kindergarten through 2nd grade, or what he refers to as "the sweet spot of literacy." The TeacherMate is relatively low in cost at about \$40 each; the costs increase to around \$100 per device when reading and math software are added. Primarily intended for the students' use with a teacher and not on their own, "preliminary data on the effectiveness of the device are promising, although more research is needed," according to William H. Teale, University of Illinois at Chicago professor of curriculum and instruction. [More—[Education Week](#)] (March 18) (*premium article access compliments of EdWeek.org*)

Using Smartphones to solve mathematics problems appears to be a smart idea, based on the experience of North Carolina students and teachers involved in ProjectK-Nect. The project, begun in 2007, is operating in three districts this year and will expand to 10 additional ones outside of North Carolina. The Smartphones, with their multiple applications – Internet access, video-camera capability, and instant-messaging options – were the preferred option of high school students who were surveyed about what mobile technology they

prefer to use. [More—[Education Week](#)] (March 18) (*premium article access compliments of EdWeek.org*)

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) is responsible for the newsletter's research, writing, and production.

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