

# Naomi Dillon Trend Analysis

**Education Vital Signs looks ahead to let you know  
what issues and challenges you'll be facing  
in the upcoming school year and beyond**

**T**o say it's been a rough couple of years would be an understatement. But saying the next few could be even worse is downright painful. After all, states began slashing their budgets in the spring of 2008, as rising unemployment and home foreclosure rates brought lower-than-anticipated revenues. In fiscal year 2010 alone, 48 states had to close a collective \$200 billion short-fall, with 30 states doing so through cuts to K-12 education.

Unfortunately, the immediate future doesn't look much better. Projections call for state deficits to reach a combined \$300 billion in FY 2011 and FY 2012. But, with only \$40 billion left from federal funds Congress allocated to help stabilize state economies, how those budget gaps are

going to be addressed is anybody's guess.

While we at *ASBJ* have kept abreast of what's been going on in the marketplace, especially as it relates to schools, financial analysts we are not. We'll leave that to the economists and focus our attention and the following pages on the education issues that we anticipate will take on increasing importance in the year ahead.

This process has included sifting through the past year's worth of education headlines, reports, and research and tapping experts to separate true trends from the simply trendy.

It's a new approach to our annual Education Vital Signs, one that recognizes that today's data is most valuable when it informs tomorrow's decisions.



## Collaboration is essential

We recognize the huge and transformational impact that the recession has had on education. From growing class sizes to decimated teacher retirement funds, the sour economy has affected every level of district operations and services.

"We're in the worst of a three-year downturn, and every bit of money that was set aside or was fat is long since gone," says Michael Griffith, a senior school finance policy analyst with the Education Commission of the States (ECS). "Districts are going on fumes, at this point."

Though we're technically out of a recession—the gross domestic product has been growing, ever so slightly since the middle of last year—for most districts, it doesn't feel that way. And since state budgets typically take 16 months to two years to turn around after economic recovery begins, districts will feel pinched for quite some time.

But if there's one upside to this down market, it's that tight times are creating closer bonds, with more educators actively looking for ways to pool resources and build partnerships within their community and beyond.

And these alliances have gone beyond the standard university-school or foundation-grantee partnerships. School systems are joining forces and driving down costs on everything from transportation services and healthier school lunches to employee health coverage and enrichment activities.

"There are all sorts of reasons for collaboration, and some of it has to do with economy," Griffith says. "Districts look for partners either to help share the cost of buying supplies, or they may look for help from the business community or parents and families to help fund programs."

But there's another reason why collaboration is becoming even more prevalent in the education world: the Obama administration.

Most of the federal education programs that the White House has launched, including the Race to the Top (RTTT) and Investing in Innovation Funds (i3), have required states to cooperatively develop programs and reform plans.

The most recent example is the \$160 million in grants that the Obama administration is offering to states that create new tests based on national standards. Two groups of states already have formed around this task and submitted proposals.

## Professional development a necessity

For as much as the economy will continue to be a factor in schools, the Obama administration is equally intent on making an impact on education. Through competitive grants like RTTT and i3, the federal government is nudging states to enact education reform models that it believes will close the achievement gap.

In this environment, staff training and development has gone from expendable to indispensable.

"Providing time and support for teachers to collaborate and learn together—in alignment with real student learning needs—remains one of the most effective ways to improve the quality of public education," says Lisa Bartusek, the associate executive director of state association services for NSBA.

Successful schools use professional development as a power tool for problem solving, diagnosing, studying, and putting into place new practices to reach and challenge students, she says.

"It's not a luxury or frill—it's the crux of good classroom instruction," Bartusek says.

And as teaching has changed over the years, so has teacher training, becoming more targeted and sophisticated. Training is also ongoing, with ample mentorship and follow-up opportunities.

Recently, urban school districts such as Philadelphia and Denver launched residency programs that mimic the intense, multiyear training that medical students receive. The West Virginia Department of Education has emphasized seminars, workshops, and online courses for its teachers and administrators. The state's annual leadership institute, in fact, offers an opportunity for faculty and administrators to work on building learning communities and best practices together.

And let's not forget about training for school boards, which are critical players in systemic change.

"The only way to ensure student learning isn't determined by street address, race, or ethnicity is to decrease the variability of instructional quality in every class in every district," says Mary Delagardelle, executive director of the Iowa School Boards Foundation, which has studied the boards of low- and high-achieving school districts for more than a decade to identify a set of success factors.

"The key to that is the board because they are the leadership group that affects the entire system."

## Tinkering with time

It's been lengthened, it's been cut. It's been condensed and it's been restructured. It's the perennial but always timely topic of instructional time.

For years—a century, really—educators and the public have argued over how much time students should spend in a structured learning environment. Very little changed—until recently. With budget cuts looming, districts in California and Hawaii as well as a handful of rural districts across the country have considered or put into place furlough days, shortened calendars, and four-day workweeks. Many others have cut after-school programs and summer school.

"The fact that districts have made substantial cuts in budgets and there's no inclination on the part of Congress to do anything about it means this will have an impact on

programs for the very kids we've been trying to focus on for the last decade," says Daniel Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators.

In Florida, just about every school system has made cuts to summer school, with about half eliminating the program entirely, according to the Florida School Boards Association. And in beleaguered California, a state education survey conducted in May revealed that 40 percent of responding districts had reduced or cut summer school in order to close budget gaps.

Meanwhile, the Afterschool Alliance surveyed nearly 1,500 after-school program leaders last year. Most reported a loss in funding, forcing them to cut activities, hours, staff, and professional development.

Often referred to as extended learning opportunities, these before- and after-school programs, summer school sessions, and evening and weekend activities have had documented success. A 2007 study that compared elementary students in after-school programs against those in unsupervised settings most days of the week found that math scores for the former were higher among students in the after-school programs. Meanwhile, a 2006 evaluation of the Building Educated Leaders for Life summer program discovered that students gained about a month's worth of reading skills over those of nonparticipants.

A few districts across the country and even one state—Massachusetts—have dabbled with restructuring the entire school day and year to include more instructional time from the ground up, but these efforts have been hamstrung by limited resources. That could change, as the Obama administration has made it clear that it believes the public school calendar and day are relics of the past. The administration is funneling money into school improvement grants that call for more instructional time.

Adding more time does nothing unless it is done in a thoughtful and strategic manner, cautions Jennifer Davis, president of the National Center on Time & Learning, a Boston-based nonprofit advocating expanded time in school. Extra time has to improve teaching and learning, and rely on data to drive how it is being used, all the while adjusting to student needs and deficiencies, she says.

"If not, then it's nothing more than glorified babysitting."

### Teacher accountability

Paying teachers based on their performance is another practice school systems and states have flirted with for years, with uneven results.

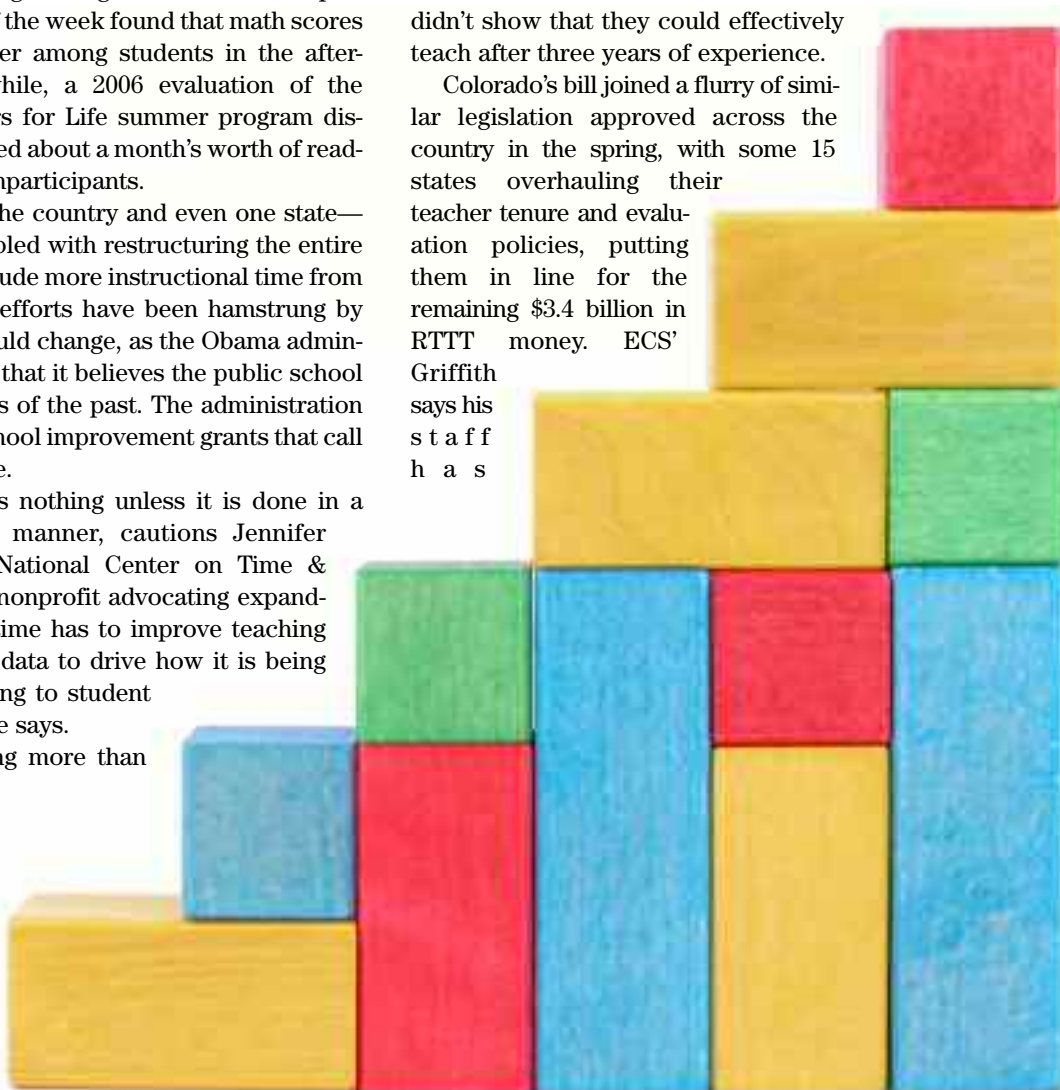
The concept has

been pushed to the forefront once again by Obama administration officials, who've not only thrown their support behind merit pay, but went further by not allowing states that prohibited the use of student achievement data in teacher evaluations to participate in the \$4.5 billion Race to the Top (RTTT) program.

The directive has pitted teachers unions against policymakers, though some states, such as Texas, objected to the federal intrusion from the beginning. In Florida, Gov. Charlie Crist eventually buckled beneath an outpouring of protests, vetoing a bill that would have nixed teacher tenure and linked salaries to student test scores. Minnesota and Indiana also bowed out of the race, citing teacher union opposition.

But Colorado, after intense debates with its teachers unions, eventually reached an agreement and approved legislation that would, among other things, tie at least half of all teacher evaluations to student performance and withhold tenure from newbie teachers who didn't show that they could effectively teach after three years of experience.

Colorado's bill joined a flurry of similar legislation approved across the country in the spring, with some 15 states overhauling their teacher tenure and evaluation policies, putting them in line for the remaining \$3.4 billion in RTTT money. ECS' Griffith says his staff has



combed through the RTTT applications, and the vast majority of them address teacher evaluation and pay.

“They are putting this under the banner of pay-for-performance, but the plans vary greatly,” Griffith says. “In some cases, they are talking about merit pay, but in other cases, differentiated pay—paying more for hard-to-staff positions like science teachers or underserved schools.”

Huge variations exist in answering how and which student achievement data should be used to grade teachers. Georgia, for example, is proposing a merit pay system for new teachers and existing teachers who choose to opt in, which would pay bonuses based on student growth and classroom observations. Florida has thrown its hat into the ring again, this time with the backing of the union, by reducing the amount that teacher evaluations and salary rely on standardized tests from 51 percent to 35 percent. Meanwhile, New York’s application ties 20 percent to 25 percent of teacher evaluations to standardized tests, though it technically won’t affect teacher pay.

While it’s impressive that federal funds—in combination with a down economy—have been able to move an intractable issue along so quickly, the bigger issue of whether a single score can accurately reflect student learning, and by extension, teacher worth, remains to be seen.

#### Where everybody knows your name

Our final prediction for education trends sweeping the nation comes from the cyberworld. School districts continue to try to keep pace with the ever-evolving technology and where it fits in education. Unfortunately, schools also are struggling with behaviors created or fueled by technology—“sexting,” cyberbullying, and student fights choreographed especially for YouTube.

While most of these policies have focused on students, more and more districts are realizing that youth aren’t the only ones who use technology inappropriately.

Last fall, a Mississippi middle-school teacher was arrested after attempting to meet a fictional 15-year-old girl set up by the police on a social networking site. Earlier this year, a Delaware high school teacher not only was charged with

having sex with a 16-year-old female student, but also with attempting to lure a 15-year-old student into a sexual relationship through another social networking site.

Such unsavory and illegal acts are what prompted Louisiana lawmakers to approve legislation late last year requiring all electronic communication between teachers and students to be documented. Missouri entertained similar legislation but never enacted it. Utah, meanwhile, mandates that school districts have policies that address student-teacher electronic communication but doesn’t dictate what that policy should include.

But the lines are sometime blurry between what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and issues of privacy and freedom of speech enter into the debate.

Earlier this year, a Pennsylvania high school teacher was placed on a 30-day unpaid suspension after parents and students apparently saw photos of her with a male stripper on Facebook. The incident occurred at a bridal shower, the teacher was fully clothed, and no minors were present. A Georgia teacher last year felt pressured to resign after someone saw photos she had posted of herself holding glasses of wine and beer on a European vacation.

More and more districts, such as Sioux Falls in South Dakota and Judson Independent School District in Texas, are prohibiting teachers from “friending” students, but those policies, some teachers argue, ignore the effectiveness of sites like Facebook as an instruction and communication tool.

“If students would actually check their school e-mail, there would be no need for me to use Facebook to try to communicate with kids,” Phil Overeem, a language arts teacher, told the *Columbia Daily Tribune* after Missouri’s Columbia Public Schools recently revised its policy on staff-student interaction because of, as the document reads, “an alarming increase in inappropriate sexual behavior between staff and students.”

While today’s students increasingly make fewer distinctions between online and in-person relationships than do adults, interactions between teachers and students should be clearly defined by appropriate behavior standards and not linked to how or where that interaction occurs, says Ann Flynn, NSBA’s director of education technology programs.

“School leaders must balance the appropriate use of evolving social networking tools to support learning and increased communication between students and teachers with the concerns that have been raised regarding improper relationships,” she says. “Engaging students, teachers, and parents in a dialogue to define ‘appropriate’ will produce more reasonable policies grounded in the realities of today’s connected world.” ■

---

Naomi Dillon (ndillon@nsba.org) is a senior editor of *American School Board Journal*.



**Want to know what the latest research is on student achievement, charters and vouchers, and school health?** Check out the new pages in Archive section of [ASBJ.com](http://ASBJ.com). Reports and research are broken out according to each subject in our topical archive.