



## YOUR ACCESS TO THE REGION

### FEATURE ARTICLE:

## THE FOUR ASSURANCES SET NEW PRIORITIES IN EDUCATION REFORM

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July 1, 2009, marked the beginning of fiscal year 2010 for 46 states. This new fiscal year is especially significant because many states and school districts were unable to access the funds provided under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 until the start of the 2010 fiscal year. Now that the money is available, the big question is "What do we do with it?"



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The majority of the stimulus funds for education are concentrated in the new State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF) and existing Title I and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) programs. As of July 17, 2009, only 21 states had spent SFSF funds, 18 states had spent Title I funds, and 20 states had spent IDEA funds. The funds spent represent 23.5 percent of the total available ARRA funds for these three programs. However, Hawaii has obligated all of its IDEA funds, California and Oklahoma have obligated all of their Title I funds, and Wisconsin has obligated all of its SFSF funds.

The U.S Department of Education has made it clear that states will be held accountable for spending the money quickly but also effectively. The SFSF program requires governors to provide assurance that they will use funds to make progress in addressing the following four key education reform areas:

- Improving collection and use of data
- Enhancing the quality of standards and assessments
- Supporting struggling schools
- Achieving equity in teacher distribution

### ARRA Guidance and Other Helpful Resources

During the past few months, the Education Department has issued guidance to help states and districts understand the requirements and expectations associated with ARRA funds. These documents included [Title I guidance](#); IDEA [Part B guidance](#) and [Part C guidance](#); [SFSF guidance](#), and [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009: Using ARRA Funds to Drive Reform and Improvement](#). States and districts also were awaiting one final document that details the metrics by which states and districts will be judged on their ability to make progress in meeting the four reform goals.

In late July 2009, the U.S. Department of Education released detailed information on the [draft SFSF Phase II application](#), [Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems Grant request for applications](#), [draft Race to the Top program materials](#), and [guidance for Enhancing Education through Technology \(Ed Tech\) grants](#). In addition, fact sheets were released on the [Investing in Innovation Fund](#), [Teacher Incentive Fund](#), and [Title I School Improvement Grants](#).

The long-awaited metrics are embodied in the [draft SFSF Phase II application](#) and are referred to as “assurance indicators and descriptors.” They are detailed in a chart on page 92 of the draft materials. In the draft materials, the Education Department states:

For each area of reform, the ARRA prescribes specific action(s) that the State must assure that it will implement. In addition, section 14005(a) of the ARRA requires a State that receives funds under the Stabilization program to submit an application to the Department containing such information as the Secretary may reasonably require. In this notice, we propose specific data and information requirements (the assurance indicators and descriptors) that a State receiving funds under the Stabilization program must meet with respect to the statutory assurances. We also propose specific requirements for a plan that a State must submit (the State plan), as part of its application for the second phase of funding under the Stabilization program, describing its ability to collect and report the required data and other information. Together, these two sets of proposed requirements aim to provide transparency on the extent to which a State is implementing the actions for which it has provided assurance.

Because almost every state is experiencing cutbacks due to budget shortfalls, state and district personnel have expressed concern about their ability to spend the funds quickly while also making progress in the assurance areas. Several resources are available to help education leaders and stakeholders during this crucial decision-making period: The U.S. Department of Education has a special webpage that shares [Ideas From the Field on Using ARRA Funds to Advance Education Improvement and Reform](#). In addition, several organizations have developed helpful resources. Although the recommendations contained in these documents do not express official Education Department positions, they nevertheless are useful. Examples include the following:

- [The Education Stimulus: Too Big to Fail](#). Learning Point Associates and Mission Measurement developed this report to support federal education officials in the development of the metrics that will measure successful use of ARRA funds. Based on interviews with education stakeholders at federal, state, and local levels, this report identifies key and consistent themes such as the tension between stabilization and innovation, state and district capacity challenges, compliance versus impact, fast money versus long-term impact, driving and being responsible for systemic change, developing a coherent national agenda, and transparency.
- [Realigning Resources for District Transformation: Using American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Funds to Advance a Strategic Education Reform Agenda](#). The Center for American Progress and Education Resource Strategies developed this report to help states and districts understand strategies to make progress toward the four ARRA reform goals, despite current economic conditions. With very little “new” funding available to school districts, the report makes the case for mapping how current resources are utilized, citing that such efforts “often uncover millions of dollars that can be reallocated from programs that don’t work to strategies with greater potential to improve performance” (p. 3). The report then provides concrete ideas for spending ARRA funds to support quality instruction and transitional investments to cover start-up costs for new programs and services.
- [Smart Options: Investing the Recovery Funds for Student Success](#). This report, written by the Coalition for Student Achievement, offers practical steps and strategies to help states and districts spend stimulus funds successfully. As stated in the introduction, “The recommendations in this guide are designed to strike a balance, realizing tangible initial benefits while transforming future outcomes for all students” (p. 6).

Most recently, Education Secretary Arne Duncan delivered major speeches to provide additional insight to the priorities set forth in the four assurances. In these speeches, he provided the public and education

stakeholders which much-anticipated insight into the Obama administration’s priorities for transforming public education in America. Following is information on the related speech as well as relevant resources for the four assurances: improving collection and use of data, enhancing the quality of standards and assessments, supporting struggling schools, and achieving equity in teacher distribution.

### ***Improving Collection and Use of Data***

On June 8, 2009, Secretary Duncan delivered the [first speech](#) of four major speeches dedicated to the four assurances. This speech, delivered at the Fourth Annual IES Research Conference, emphasized the important role of data in improving teacher effectiveness and tracking student achievement.

One of the greatest challenges that Secretary Duncan outlined is that “people don’t know how to read data, how to sift through it or understand it and that’s really a challenge for all of us. This is just an insider conversation, but [it] affects everyone outside of this club: parents, children, taxpayers, and employers. And the stakes have never been higher. We must tell the truth and we must tell it clearly.”

Secretary Duncan provided a glimpse of how he intends to use better data:

- “We will ask thousands of communities across American to close and reopen schools based on data.”
- “We will ask millions of teacher to use student achievement and annual growth [data] to drive instruction and evaluation.”
- “We [will] ask elected officials in states across American to embrace higher standards, even though the initial data for their states may reflect badly on them and their schools.”
- “We will also push states to make data available to researchers.”
- “We must track high-growth children in classrooms to their great teachers and great teachers to their schools of education.”
- “We want to see more states building comprehensive systems that track students from pre-K through college and then link school data to workforce data.”

**Relevant Resources.** The U.S. Department of Education website provides several resources on the [effective use of data](#). The Learning Point Associates *Education Recovery and Reinvestment Center* website also has a [data collection webpage](#) that explains data collection requirements, making the case for comprehensive data systems, building data systems, and collecting and using data. Of particular note are the resources identified on this webpage that are published by the [Data Quality Campaign](#).

### ***Enhancing the Quality of Standards and Assessments***

Secretary Duncan delivered his [second speech](#) on June 14, 2009, at the National Governors Association’s 2009 Governors Education Symposium and focused on the assurance relating to standards and assessments. He noted that “creating common standards hasn’t always been popular.... While this effort is being led at the state level—as it should be—it is absolutely a national challenge—that we must meet together or we will compromise our future.”

In this speech, he noted key requirements to developing rigorous and effective standards and assessments:

- “The standards must be tied to the endpoint of making sure students are ready to succeed in college or in the workplace.”
- “We need standards that will get them ready for the day after they graduate.”
- “You must resist the temptation to make these standards too easy.”
- “We must limit standards to the essential knowledge and skills our kids need so teachers can focus in depth on the most important things their kids should know.”

- “We need tests that measure whether students are mastering complex materials and can apply their knowledge in ways that show they are ready for college and careers.”
- “We need test that go beyond multiple choice.”
- “We also encourage you to work together to develop benchmark tests so that teachers can understand how their students are doing during the school year and can target instruction accordingly.”

Secretary Duncan also provided an assurance of his own: “The fact is—higher standards will make some of your states look bad in the short term—because fewer students will be meeting them. So I will work with you to ensure that your states will not be penalized for doing the right thing.” He also announced that the U.S. Department of Education will dedicate up to \$350 million to help states develop assessments align to these standards.

**Relevant Resources.** The *Education Recovery and Reinvestment Center* website has a [standards and assessment webpage](#) that explains approaches for enhancing assessment quality; developing an aligned approach to standards, assessment, and accountability; increasing rigor and relevance in academic content standards; and developing state consortia to leverage resources. Additional resources are available from the following organizations:

- [Assessment and Accountability Comprehensive Center](#)
- [National Alternative Assessment Center](#)
- [National Center on Educational Outcomes](#)
- [National Center on Student Progress Monitoring](#)

### **Supporting Struggling Schools**

On June 22, 2009, Secretary Duncan delivered his [third speech](#) on the four assurances at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools conference, where he focused on the challenge of turning around chronically low achieving schools. He noted, “There are approximately 5,000 schools in this chronically under-performing category—roughly 5 percent of the total. About half are in big cities, maybe a third are in rural areas—and the rest in suburbs and medium-sized towns. This is a national problem—urban, rural and suburban.”

Although a good portion of his speech focused on his support for an expansion of charter schools, Secretary Duncan provided some clear ideas for how he envisions turning around the bottom 5 percent of the schools in the nation. In his speech, he identified the characteristics that make traditional and charter schools great:

- “Presence of an education strategy built around common-sense ideas”
- “More time on task”
- “Aligned curricula”
- “High parent involvement”
- “Great teacher support”
- “Strong leadership”
- A “clean, orderly” school
- Staff who are “positive and welcoming” where “the kids and the classroom are the focus”
- “Award-winning schoolwork on the walls”
- “Discipline and enthusiasm in the children”
- “Parents engaged”

- “Teachers collaborating on instruction”

He then acknowledged the key role that principals play in this endeavor, citing the need for 5,000 “hero principals” and stated that he intended to start with 100–200 principals by fall 2010 and build up to 1,000 per year: “Experience tells us that failing schools usually have poor leadership—and poor leadership usually drives away good teachers.” But, he was clear about additional necessities: “At a minimum, for a turnaround to succeed you have to change the school culture. In most cases, simply replacing the principal is not enough. We want transformation—not tinkering.” To accomplish this goal, he laid out the following four turnaround model approaches:

1. In the first turnaround model, “the children stay and the staff leaves. Teachers can reapply for their jobs and some get rehired, but most go elsewhere. A few leave the profession, which is not all bad.”
2. The second turnaround model “also involves replacing the staff and leadership and turning it over to a charter or for-profit management organization.”
3. The third turnaround model “keeps most of the existing staff but changes the culture in the following ways. Again, we are open to input on this, but at a minimum:
  - “They must establish a rigorous performance evaluation system along with more support, training and mentoring.
  - “They must change and strengthen the curriculum and instructional program.
  - “They must increase learning time for kids during afternoons, weekends, and in the summer—and provide more time for teachers to collaborate, plan and strategize.
  - “And principals and leadership teams must be given more flexibility around budgeting, staffing and calendar.

“They must use everything we know about how to create a successful school culture—but do it all at once—with enough resources to get the job done. This approach makes more sense in smaller communities where there isn’t a ready supply of new teachers and leaders—and where the current staff won’t have other job options. This model also gives unions an opportunity to take responsibility for fixing schools without replacing staff.”
4. The fourth turnaround model “is simply to close under-performing schools and reenroll the students in better schools. This may seem like surrender—but in some cases it’s the only responsible thing to do. It instantly improves the learning conditions for those kids and brings a failing school to a swift and thorough conclusion.”

He concluded his remarks by emphasizing the responsibilities of leaders at the state and local level: “If they won’t make these choices, I can’t force them to do it. My job is to support the work—provide funding—help define success—and drive the public consensus toward the desired outcome. But the people who run our schools—and the parents who depend on them—must demand change if they want it to happen.”

**Relevant Resources.** The U.S. Department of Education website provides several resources on [turning around low-performing schools](#). The *Education Recovery and Reinvestment Center* website’s [support for struggling schools webpage](#) provides information on the following successful strategies to turn around low-performing schools: understand the challenges, identify resources and tools, collect and use data, and develop a plan for turning around low-performing schools or restructuring. The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement has identified [six quality indicators of high-achieving schools](#): aligned and rigorous curriculum, effective instructional practices, use of student performance data, positive school climate that fosters student achievement, effective school leadership, and parental and community engagement.

## **Achieving Equity in Teacher Distribution**

The [last in the series of speeches](#) on the four assurances was delivered by Secretary Duncan on July 2, 2009, at the National Education Association's meeting. The related assurance was teacher effectiveness and equitable distribution, but the focus of his remarks was on the quality of the entire education workforce: teachers, principals, and education support professionals.

Secretary Duncan cited his work in Chicago as the basis for his approach to improving the education workforce. "We enlisted the help of 24 of the best teachers in the system to design a pilot performance compensation system. We also sat down with the union and bargained it out." Key elements of his approach included the following:

- "Classroom observation"
- "Whole school performance"
- "Individual classroom performance, measured in part by growth in student learning"
- "Rewards and incentives...[for] good performance for every adult in the school—including custodians and cafeteria workers—not just the individual teachers."

He also cited important areas of agreement that he believes must exist between the administration and the teachers unions:

- "Excellence in teaching"
- "Good professional development"
- "School's open longer hours"
- "Shared responsibility for student success among all the adults in the school building"

Secretary Duncan continued to cite the important role of principals, which he introduced in his previous week's speech on turning around low-performing schools: "Great principals lead talented instructional teams that drive student performance and close achievement gaps. They deserve to be recognized and rewarded. But if they're not up to the job, they need to go." He then cited a list of factors—some controversial—that were on the forefront of his agenda:

- "If we agree that children need more time—then we must give it to them."
- "If we agree that teachers need more support, then we must give it to them."
- "But if we agree that the adults in these schools are failing these children, then we have to find the right people and we can't let our rules and regulations get in the way."
- "We created seniority rules that protect teachers from arbitrary and capricious management—and that's a good goal. But sometimes those rules place teachers in schools and communities where they won't succeed—and that's wrong."
- "When an ineffective teacher gets a chance to improve and doesn't—and when the tenure system keeps that teacher in the classroom anyway—then the system is protecting jobs rather than children."

He ended his speech with the following statement: "When great teachers are unrecognized and unrewarded—when struggling teachers are unsupported—and when failing teachers are unaddressed—the teaching profession is damaged."

**Relevant Resources.** The U.S. Department of Education website provides several resources on [improving teacher quality](#). The *Education Recovery and Reinvestment Center* website has a [teacher effectiveness and equitable distribution webpage](#) that addresses the following topics: defining and evaluating teacher effectiveness, increasing the pool of teachers and streamlining ways to hire them, and improving retention by creating a culture that encourages teachers to stay. Of particular value is a new tool published by the

National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, which is administered by Learning Point Associates and funded by the U.S. Department of Education: [\*Using ARRA Funds to Improve Teacher Effectiveness and Equitable Distribution: An Interactive Mapping Tool\*](#) is modeled on a subway map and designed to guide conversations on the strategic use of ARRA funds to improve teacher effectiveness and equitable distribution.

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