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Review of *College- and Career-Ready Students*

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Summary of Review

On May 4, 2010, the Obama administration released "College- and Career-Ready Students," one of six "research summaries" supporting its proposals for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This research summary addresses three key areas: common core standards, rewarding progress and success, and turning around low-performing schools. The proposed goals are laudable and the summary of the problems in American education is generally accurate. But the research foundation it provides is superficial and inadequate. Some of the significant proposals, such as the accountability system and "rewarding progress and success" are not addressed; and for two major issues, national standards and school turn-arounds, the research cited does not support the document's conclusions. Fewer than 15% of the report's references rely on independent, peer-reviewed research. The document advances rhetorical ends and political goals rather than providing a sound research base for the proposed policies. Overall, the document is of little or no value for those who seek evidence of the soundness of the Obama administration's proposed legislation.

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Review of *College- and Career-Ready Students*

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I. Introduction

In March 2010, the Obama administration released a *Blueprint* outlining its proposals for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).[1] In May 2010 the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) followed with a set of six documents offered as "research summaries" supporting the administration's plans.[2]

The first of these six reports, titled "College- and Career-Ready Students," is the focus of this review.[3] The administration's approach promotes the following policies: 1) supporting rigorous national standards that prepare students for college or a career; 2) rewarding schools that make progress; and 3) utilizing certain strategies to "turn around" low-performing schools.

The administration's proposals unquestionably represent an extraordinary federalization of education policy, even more sweeping than the policies enacted by the George W. Bush administration. They also accept and expand the premise of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) that tough accountability policies will improve schools and academic achievement. The "college- and career-ready" proposals would have the practical effect of establishing national educational

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standards, as opposed to the current collection of diverse state standards. Federal policy would mandate dramatic governance changes, particularly for low-scoring schools. States would be required to implement one of four turn-around strategies for low-performing schools: replacing the principal, replacing staff, converting to a charter school, or closing the school. Although the direst penalties would apply only to the bottom five percent of schools, these 5,000 schools are likely to be concentrated in poor and minority communities. Further, the ripple effects can be expected to narrow curriculum and intensify test prep activities at all schools facing these sanctions.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the "College- and Career-Ready" Research Summary

Like other research summaries, the first page is a reprint of the *Blueprint's* opening section (p. 7). It summarizes reports on the varying quality and rigor of state standards and assessments, as well as reports on the number of students who require remediation when entering college.

College- and Career-Ready Students

Support for the claim that all students must graduate from high school college- or career-ready is provided by citing a government study on college remediation percentages, an estimate of lost wages from a vested interest group, and a think-tank study on the skills needed for future job openings. Two supporting references are provided from private corporations -- with contracts to develop these standards (ACT and Achieve).[4] Lengthy passages are cited from a USDOE study that illustrates the differences among state standards and concludes that nine states have lowered their standards in response to NCLB.[5] The research summary implies that common, national standards will prevent states from lowering standards.

Rewarding Progress and Success

"Rewarding progress and success" is one of the key elements in the *Blueprint* (pp. 7-10). Yet the research summary offers no discussion of this topic beyond an opening bullet point. The only relevant discussion is located in the "College- and Career-Ready" section, where two sub-topics are addressed: (a) the failure of the existing system to measure growth in individual student achievement from year to year; and (b) the ever-increasing number of schools labeled as failing, regardless of the school's efforts. The document acknowledges that the NCLB system is fundamentally flawed in its goal of 100% of students reaching proficiency on state tests. This causes many otherwise effective schools to be labeled as "failing." The document also recognizes that states and school districts lack the capacity to effectively intervene in struggling schools. In response to this lack of capacity, the administration proposes improved data collection and recommends early education and family engagement. In addition, it claims that staffing high-needs schools with less-experienced, lower-paid teachers results in the artificial depression of per-pupil spending at these schools and neutralizes the effects of supplemental Title I funds.

Turning Around Low-Achieving Schools

The research summary lists three approaches that the administration believes will turn around low-performing schools: (1) "large grants for significant changes," (2) district choice employing one of the four turn-around models, and (3) capacity-building. In the less than three pages of text, these notions are not well-explained. The text does report that schools have used the least intrusive reform mechanism in NCLB and, quoting Massachusetts Insight, a group that provides turn-around consulting, it asserts that incremental reforms do not work. Interestingly, the

The document starts with a pre-determined end (the Blueprint) and back-fills support for these positions. While it presents itself as a research document, it is in fact a political document.

research summary also cites a report from the Center on Education Policy and the Alliance for Excellent Education as supporting the conclusion that, ". . . a persistently low performing school requires extensive effort and strong support." There is a significant difference between providing "extensive effort and strong support" to a school and closing the school down, but the research summary does not explore or even acknowledge this contradiction.

The vast majority of this section explains the administration's belief that high-poverty, low-performing schools can achieve academic standards if they use certain approaches. These techniques are strong expectations, strong leadership and staff, improved instructional programs, extended class time, engaged families, and changed governance (i.e., charter schools). Rather than present the research findings supporting these notions, this short section is dominated by six side-bar testimonials of how selected model schools or districts overcame adverse circumstances. While the companion page in the *Blueprint* (p. 12) is focused on the four turn-around strategies for low-achieving schools, the research summary does not even address these critical elements.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report seeks to provide a research foundation for the administration's proposals for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which would replace the previous administration's No Child Left Behind program.

The document starts with a pre-determined end (the *Blueprint*) and back-fills support for these positions. While it presents itself as a research document, it is in fact a political document. Thus, the summary can only be judged on the basis of whether it provides a sufficient, accurate, and compelling research base to support its conclusions.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The research summary, intended to provide a rationale for major national policy, reflects little of the relevant, significant research literature. Many of the proposals are worthy of thorough review and consideration on their merits. Unfortunately, that research is largely missing here.

Inadequate Quality of Sources

Overall, the quality of the research cited is extraordinarily weak. Of the 62 references cited, 23 are from think tanks, most with explicit policy agendas. In the "school turn-around grants" section, 14 of the 27 references are from think tanks, often with an agenda.[6] Such a heavy

reliance on sources dominated by vested interest groups and lacking in independent peer-reviewed quality control[7] is inappropriate for an important government research summary. Likewise, the inclusion of citations from contractors with a direct financial interest in the adoption of the recommended policy is troubling.

Another 13 of the 62 total references are from governmental sources. These would generally be authoritative sources for descriptive data. However, many of these citations do not support the policy interpretations attached to them. For instance, the lengthy description of ever-increasing

The broader research base, uncited here, provides little or no support for the administration's position.

numbers of schools being identified as needing assistance would logically argue for greater capacity, but how but how increasing data collection, early education and family engagement will resolve this capacity problem is far from clear.

Overall, only about 15% of the references appear to have come from peer-reviewed, independent sources. On all these issues, high-quality research studies and findings are available. They just were not used.

Inaccurate or Unbalanced Presentation of the Literature

While a Center on Education Policy report is cited in the "school turnaround" section, the Center's explicit recommendation *against* all four federal turn-around models is not mentioned in the research summary.[8] To impose these models on the nation's lowest-performing schools with little or no evidence of their efficacy is risky if not reckless. The Center on Educational Policy's explicit warning that massive leader and staff turnover could cause more harm than good is ignored. Evidence from Secretary Duncan's former school district, Chicago, shows that the charter schools have high turnover, and scores are lowest in these schools.[9]

In another example of misrepresenting the research findings, Holzer and Lerman are cited as supporting the statement, "Students who do not attend college will need additional workforce training to advance their career." Actually, what Holzer and Lerman say is,

> . . . the projections indicate a dramatic slowdown in the growth of skills over the next two decades, at both the top and the middle of the labor market. In fact, the slowdown in growth among workers with some college exceeds the slowdown among workers with a bachelor's degree or more.[10]

Since this is the only independent citation on the subject of future work-force needs, the government simply fails to support its claim. The broader research base, uncited here, provides little or no support for the administration's position. For instance, Richard Rothstein uses Bureau of Labor Statistics data to show that only 22% of jobs need a college degree; in contrast, 40% require one month or less of on-the-job training.[11] Universal opportunity to be prepared for college is an admirable and worthy goal, but the government simply fails to make its case.

General Paucity of Research Content

Overall, the meager twelve page research summary pays little heed to peer-reviewed research. Instead, it repeats sections of the *Blueprint*, describes NCLB processes, and provides a number of testimonials. In other words, it substitutes rhetoric for research.

It uses only one peer-reviewed article on college remediation rates. To support the claim of lost

The research summary, however, does not explain how the establishment of rigorous and common national standards will result in improved academic performance.

earnings for less-educated citizens, the summary cites a think tank that advocates for high school reform. No evidence is produced to show that the recommended policies will reduce the remediation rate or better prepare students for success in college.

Irrelevance

Often the research summary does not speak to the question at hand. For example, the document includes a sidebar listing "college readiness indicators." While this might be of value in examining the use of broad-based assessments as mentioned in the *Blueprint*, the reader is left guessing as to why this material was included. It has no connection with the text.

The unevenness of existing state standards is well documented and there is no doubt that they exist. The research summary, however, does not explain how the establishment of rigorous and common national standards will result in improved academic performance. Some states with excellent standards, like Massachusetts, have high performance; others with excellent standards, like California, do not. The research summary provides rhetoric and exhortation, not research. Since the standards now urged upon the states have never been tested and their effectiveness is unknown, they should be piloted and validated before they are imposed on the nation's schools and students.[12]

V. Review of the Report's Methods

Due to critical omissions, a reliance on anecdotal claims, rhetorical overstatement, and its unabashed advocacy for the administration's political agenda, the document is neither a research review nor a literature review.

Omissions

There are numerous examples of fundamental omissions:

Does accountability work?

The document fails to address or even acknowledge the fundamental question of whether top-down accountability systems improve student performance on tests. With nearly 10 years of experience with state standards in the 1990s and another eight years of NCLB, this omission is glaring. The actual research literature addressing this pivotal question is mixed, with some studies showing modest test-score gains and others showing null or negative effects, but that debate is absent here. Given the critical importance of this issue, the administration should have presented a balanced review of the research literature.[13]

Does the administration's accountability plan have promise?

The *Blueprint* discusses the accountability system in some detail (pp. 8-10). This most important and controversial topic is not addressed at all in the research summary. Also not mentioned are critical related questions, such as whether higher standards will increase drop-outs and the activities needed to prevent this from happening.

Rewards

The *Blueprint* says, "We must reward the success of schools that are making significant progress (p.7)." This positive-sounding statement is expanded to include the possibility of "financial rewards for staff and students" (p. 10), but there is no explanation of how such rewards would be implemented and no presentation of any research supporting such a notion. What is the definition of success? What is the definition of significant progress? What rewards would be available? Would the rewards be drawn from the funds set aside to support struggling schools? Are these rewards expected to lead to higher test scores or to serve as bonuses for getting there? Is this expectation supported by research? Is this a euphemism for competitive grants where some needy schools get money and others do not? These important questions are neither asked nor answered.

Are the "turn-around models effective?

The four turn-around strategies, though given prominence in the *Blueprint* (p. 12), are not listed, let alone examined, in the research summary. And indeed there is little in the research literature to support the turn-around models.[14] This is an especially troubling omission since the administration will impose severe sanctions on schools that serve large numbers of the nation's neediest children. In fact, with evidence that some of these interventions are harmful, such an omission is inexcusable.[15]

Funding equity

The *Blueprint* says that states will be required to have funding equity (p. 11). This is not addressed in the research document in any systematic way except for a minor reference to the inequalities of within-district money distribution.[16] There is no reference to the fact that federal

Title I money represents only 1.5% of total education funding or to how this inadequate sum could be redistributed in a manner that would resolve massive national, state and/or local inequities. The largest sources of funding disparities are the education budgets of states and school districts,[17] but how this fundamental problem will be resolved is not discussed. The later announcement that a "task force" would be formed does not cover the omission.

The research summary states that urban teachers tend to be paid less than their suburban colleagues, but no research or serious funding proposal is presented addressing how to remedy this inequity. Nor does the report explain how high-quality teachers might be redistributed to needy schools.

Funding adequacy

Approximately 70 studies have indicated that additional overall funding, at levels of 20-40%, is required to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged children.[18] The actual spending levels for economically disadvantaged children are lower than the nation's average for all children, even after taking into account federal and state special funds such as Title I.[19] While President Obama has acknowledged that the core Title I system is underfunded,[20] this most vital of unresolved issues escapes attention in the *Blueprint*, the research summary, and the administration's budget proposals. The result is that the administration misdirects attention to peripheral issues while evading core funding inequities.

Unexamined Value Presumptions

The report announces the purpose of America's education system in its first sentence as being to make high school graduates college- or career-ready. In truth, the American educational system has multiple purposes, which have evolved and been debated over the years.[21] Preparing

The research summary is rife with inaccuracies, misrepresentations and misunderstandings of cited sources, as well as superficial treatment of the topics.

"college- and career-ready students" is certainly one of these purposes, but the report's over-simplification, pronounced *ex cathedra*, is unwarranted. Not all of education's purposes are strictly utilitarian and economic. Surely among other valued purposes of American education are education for citizenship in a democracy and education for a meaningful life.

The research summary also presumes that "growth models," or comparing test scores of a group of students over time, are the solution to key NCLB shortcomings. The research summary argues that the growth model is necessary because the current NCLB system is flawed. This is the fallacy of the false dilemma: merely demonstrating the problems with NCLB's approach does not prove the worth of growth models. In fact, significant psychometric issues remain unresolved.[22] Certainly, growth models are worthy of further exploration, but these concepts are still in their

infancy, the measurement errors in the current models are too great and the potential dangers to districts, schools, teachers, and students are too high to justify them for high-stakes use.[23]

Another presumption is that "data" and its use will somehow resolve the problems of the schools. The *Blueprint* describes in some detail the massive amounts of data that states will be required to collect. While testimonials to the virtues of being "data-driven" are provided, only two references are given, neither of which is peer-reviewed. The unexamined assumption is that the data derived from tests and various demographic identifiers provide what we need to know to improve schools. There is no research support for this presumption. Careful researchers would also object to test data as the sole measure of the quality of a classroom. The reader is left to speculate as to how this raw aggregation of data will resolve reading difficulties or overcome the burdens associated with poverty such as poor health and nutrition.

The report further presumes that low-performing schools are *ipso facto* "bad" or "failing" schools, ignoring the fact that most low-performing schools serve disproportionate numbers of students who live in poverty or who are English-language learners or who have special needs.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings, Conclusions, and Usefulness of the Summary to Guide Policy

The research summary does not provide accurate, comprehensive, or high quality research findings. Nearly half of the references are from organizations with either strong ideological predispositions or a clear financial interest in these policy decisions (such as ACT, Achieve, Data Quality Campaign, Center for American Progress, MassInsight, and Education Sector). The research summary is rife with inaccuracies, misrepresentations and misunderstandings of cited sources, as well as superficial treatment of the topics. The report does not adequately address (or omits altogether) the research on the most central issues, such as the accountability system, the turn-around models, and the lack of adequate funds for the neediest students. Even when the summary identifies flaws in the current law, it does not provide specific guidance on remedies. As a research document, the summary is of little or no use in guiding policy.

Notes and References

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[2] U.S. Department of Education (2010). *Research Behind the Obama Administration's Proposal for Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. Washington, DC: author. Retrieved June 7 2010, from http://www.ed.gov/blog/2010/05/research-behind-the-obama-administration

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[4] The government report on college remediation is from NCES and the estimated cost of lost wages from drop-outs is from the Alliance for Excellent Education. The citation on future work force needs is Holzer, H. J. & Lerman, R. I. (2009). *The future of middle-skills jobs*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution. Retrieved May 23, 2010, from http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2009/02_middle_skills_jobs_holzer.aspx

[5] Citing Bandiera de Mello, V., Blankenship, C & McLaughlin, D. (2009). *Mapping state proficiency standards onto NAEP scales 2005-2007*. (NCES 2010-456) Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Education

[6] Among the groups and sources referenced in this section are the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, Center on Innovation and Improvement, ERS, EdSource, Education Trust, Wallace foundation, Education Sector, Mass Insight, Academic Development Institute, Alliance for Excellent Education, SRI international and the Philadelphia Inquirer.

[7] See Welner, K. G., Hinchey, P., Molnar, A., & Weitzman, D. (Eds.) (2010). *Think Tank Research Quality: Lessons for Policymakers, the Media, and the Public*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

[8] Center on Education Policy (2008, September). *A call to restructure restructuring: Lessons from the No Child Left Behind Act in five states*. Washington, DC: author:

> However, since these options contain specific directives that are not supported by research, it is unwise to prescribe them. As policymakers work to reauthorize ESEA, they should refrain from codifying these four models in law as requirements for all restructuring or low-performing schools. Instead, CEP research suggests that a more appropriate federal role is to provide monetary support, requirements for oversight of the use of these funds, guidance based on research, and ongoing evaluations of improvement efforts. (p.27)

[9] Karp, S. (August 2010). "A revolving door for charter teachers." *Catalyst Chicago*. Retrieved September 3, 2010, from http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/news/index.php?item=2637&cat=23.

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[10] Holzer, H. J. & Lerman, R. I. (2009). *The future of middle-skills jobs*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, pp. 5-6. Retrieved May 23, 2010 from http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2009/02_middle_skills_jobs_holzer.aspx

[11] Rothstein, R. (April 7, 2008). *"A nation at risk" twenty-five years later*. CATO Unbound. Retrieved March 29, 2010 from http://www.cato-unbound.org/2008/04/07/richard-rothstein/a-nation-at-risk-twenty-five-years-later

[12] Mathis, W. J. (2010). *The "Common Core" Standards Initiative: An Effective Reform Tool?* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved July 29, 2010 from http://epicpolicy.org/publication/common-core-standards

[13] See, for example,

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[15]See, for example,

Center on Education Policy (2008, September). *A call to restructure restructuring: Lessons from the No Child Left Behind Act in five states*. Washington, DC: author.

Mathis, W. (2009). *NCLB's Ultimate Restructuring Alternatives: Do they Improve the Quality of Education?* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved June 8, 2010 from http://epicpolicy.org/publication/nclb-ultimate-restructuring.

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[17] See Baker, B. D. & Welner, K. G. (2010). Premature celebrations: The persistence of inter-district funding disparities. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *18*(9). Retrieved June 20, 2010 from http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/741

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[20] Weinstein, A. (undated). Obama on No child left behind. Retrieved July 8, 2010 from http://www.education.com/magazine/article/Obama_Child_Left_Behind/

[21] See, for example, Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press, 95-98.

[22] For a more technical discussion of these issues, see the National Research Council and National Academy of Education working group papers at http://www7.national academies.org/bota/VAM_Workshop_Agenda.html In particular; see the papers by Robert Linn and Mark Reckase.

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[23] Linn, R. L. (March 2000). Assessments and Accountability. *Educational Researcher*. 29(2), 4-15:

> I am led to conclude that in most cases the instruments and technology have not been up to the demands that have been placed on them by high-stakes accountability. Assessment systems that are useful monitors lose much of their dependability and credibility for that purpose when high-stakes are attached to them. The unintended negative effects of the high-stakes accountability uses often outweigh the intended positive effects. (p. 14)

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