

Putting the World into World-Class Education: A National Imperative and a State and Local Responsibility

One of our great strengths as a nation is our creativity and determination to lead the world in developing innovations and technologies that can catapult us into a new era. Today, we stand at a critical moment in our history. The quickening pace of globalization over the past twenty years – driven by the profound technological changes described by Thomas Friedman in *The World is Flat*; by the economic rise of China and India; and by the accelerating pace of educational expansion and scientific discovery – has produced a whole new world. Education is at the core of responding to its challenges and opportunities. Even as we tackle the immediate economic crisis, our long-term economic competitiveness and ability to deal with global military and environmental challenges urgently requires citizens prepared for the interconnected world of the 21st century. Our national goals must therefore include ensuring that every student has access to a world-class education and producing an internationally competent workforce and informed citizenry.

To succeed in this new global era, we need not only to increase the number of high school graduates and improve the rigor of our math and science curriculum, but also to ensure that our graduates are “globally competent”. While definitions of “global competence” and “international education” vary, it is generally agreed to include:

- knowledge of other world regions, cultures, economies, and global issues;
- skills to communicate in languages other than English, to work in cross-cultural teams, and to assess information from different sources around the world; and
- values of respect for other cultures.

Teaching and learning about the world can take place in many ways - through arts and culture, languages, economics, geography, history, and through science, math, and technology. It is not a separate discipline, but a perspective that informs and modernizes every discipline.

Increasing the number of globally competent graduates, ready to compete and contribute to the world they will enter five, ten, or even twenty years from now, will require significant innovation and strategic new investments. But we can no longer afford to be lagging behind other countries in high school graduation rates and math and science standards, while producing graduates who lack the world knowledge, skills, and perspectives to be successful in this global era. A recent report by the National Research Council warns, “The pervasive lack of knowledge about foreign cultures and languages threatens the security of the United States as well as its ability to compete in the global marketplace and produce an informed citizenry.”¹

This national challenge demands immediate action by our new President and Congress, working with the nation’s Governors, educators, and business leaders, to help create internationally competitive education systems that are held to world-class standards and benchmarks.

A New Federal, State, and Local Partnership

Ultimately, states must assume the responsibility of raising our nation's graduation rate and helping local communities and schools prepare students to graduate college-ready and globally competent. States are no longer competing with the state next door – they are competing with countries around the world for trade, foreign direct investment, and job creation. States are therefore critical to creating internationally competitive education systems that will prepare students to support dynamic economies. They need incentives and support to benchmark their education systems internationally and build capacity to improve.

At the same time that Governors are trying to create new economic opportunities, they are facing a high school dropout crisis that many are calling “catastrophic”. Today the United States' high school graduation rate ranks near the bottom among developed nations belonging to OECD – 18 among 24 countries with comparable data, with countries like Finland, Germany, Japan, and South Korea more than 15 percentage points ahead.ⁱⁱ Over the last two decades, our competitors have recognized that raising high school and college graduation rates are the keys to developing a workforce capable of succeeding in the global knowledge economy. Unfortunately, America has almost stood still while the global talent pool has grown across the world.

The greatest challenge in most countries is the continuing education and opportunity gap between different socio-economic groups. As education expands and improves in many parts of the world, we must engage all of our talent pool. For low-income minority students, closing the achievement gap on basic skills is an essential step towards real equality of opportunity. But to be successful in the 21st century global environment, students must acquire the global knowledge and skills *that are part of a new definition of equal opportunity.*

States and local school districts are beginning to recognize the challenge. Governors have agreed to accurately measure graduation rates beginning no later than 2012. Many districts and secondary schools are stepping up to this challenge, but to ensure that all students have the opportunity to graduate globally competent and college-ready will require leadership from the federal level. A federal investment, in partnership with states, must target funds to communities with the greatest needs to turn around “dropout factories” that graduate less than 60 percent of their students and the failing middle schools that feed into them. To do this, schools must better engage students in learning and make it relevant to the “real world” of the 21st century if they expect students to stay in school. We cannot realize a secure and prosperous 21st century America without ensuring access to a world-class education for all students, including disadvantaged and minority youth for whom American schools have historically fallen short.

Business leaders, educators, policymakers, and parents are recognizing that knowledge of the world is not a luxury, but a necessity for every student. They agree that we can no longer afford to ask whether we should teach about the world

beyond our borders but how to do it in the context of other demands on our schools. According to the Committee for Economic Development, a non-profit organization of more than 200 business leaders and university presidents, “to compete successfully in the global marketplace, both U.S.-based multinational corporations as well as small businesses increasingly need employees with knowledge of foreign languages and cultures to market products to customers around the globe and to work effectively with foreign employees and partners in other countries.”ⁱⁱⁱ However, many of our teachers and school leaders are not prepared to introduce global content, lacking the same knowledge of world languages, cultures, and issues as their students.^{iv} Some people fear diverting attention from a focus on basic skills, but emerging research shows that teaching with a global context need not be an added burden, but rather can be a driving force in improving student learning, scores on standards-based tests, and graduation rates.^v It can also make our nation’s diversity one of its greatest strengths, drawing on the diversity of our communities while extending our students’ horizons from the neighborhood to the world.

Every American deserves access to an international education, and information and communications technology has immense potential to address issues of quality, equity, and the new global skill set. Education is no longer synonymous with a building containing blackboards and teachers. As connectivity becomes ubiquitous, technology can provide, for example: an open-access library of high-quality materials that are available free to children anywhere; interactive online courses in subjects for which teachers are not available locally such as critical languages, global economics, or global environmental challenges; and online connections to students and teachers around the world.

Across the United States, states and schools are recognizing the need to prepare our students with the skills they will need to succeed in the 21st century. Hundreds of schools have updated their mission to produce graduates who are globally ready.^{vi} More than twenty-five states are working to integrate international content into their state standards, to create internationally themed schools, and to expand languages, including less commonly taught languages such as Chinese and Arabic.^{vii} But these efforts are just beginning and often lack the sustained support to go to scale. Ultimately, if our nation is to meet the new challenges and opportunities of a globalized world, national leadership and resources will be needed.

National Policy Recommendations: Putting the World into World-Class Education

With the education of our citizens and America’s standing as a world leader at stake, we urge the new President and 111th Congress to make graduating globally competent citizens a national priority and to provide the leadership necessary to make strategic new investments in education that address this challenge.

Five key policy areas should be addressed:

- **Providing states with incentives to internationally benchmark their educational systems and standards against other countries.** OECD has begun to identify common characteristics of educationally high performing countries including: high ambitions and universally high standards; serious attention to equity, diversity, and individualized learning; systems for recruiting, preparing, and supporting high-quality teachers and school leaders; and combining universal standards with substantial autonomy for schools. Incentives should be provided to states to benchmark their performance against other countries and support more work in this area so that policymakers can examine the highest performing schools and also those rapidly improving countries that will compete for American jobs and expertise.
- **Redesigning and creating middle and high schools to address equity, excellence, and global competence for all students.** In the 20th century, the United States was the first in the world to achieve universal primary and secondary education. However universal access has not produced universal high school graduation. On graduation rates as well as international tests of student achievement, our students have fallen behind students in half of other advanced countries. Focused efforts are needed to support state and local initiatives to redesign middle and high schools to raise high school graduation rates and transform schools to create college-ready and globally competent graduates.
- **Investing in our education leaders and teachers' capacity to teach the international dimensions of their subjects.** Partnerships should be stimulated across all levels of government, the community, and the private sector to provide opportunities for teachers, principals, and teacher educators to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for the 21st century including: updating their knowledge of world regions, economics, and global challenges; understanding how to work as part of international teams to address these challenges; and the ability to communicate across cultures.
- **Building national capacity in world languages from pre-school through college.** To increase our capacity to communicate in other languages, instruction must start in the early grades and continue through high school and college, making use of interactive technologies and effective practices such as immersion and dual-language programs. A federal, state, and local partnership could dramatically increase the pipeline of language learners, especially in languages that have been identified as critical to America's economic competitiveness and national security.
- **Expanding federal programs that support the engagement of U.S. students and teachers with the rest of the world.** Whereas 0.5 percent of U.S. college students studied abroad in 2000, the comparable figures were 3 percent for France and China, 16 percent for Ireland, and 30 percent for Singapore. Only 50

percent of U.S. high school students take even one year of a foreign language. In many other countries, education leaders study education practices internationally, teachers are encouraged to study abroad, schools are encouraged to form sister-school partnerships with schools in other countries, and all students learn a second language. We need to do far more to encourage our students and teachers to experience other cultures both at home and abroad.

Substantial and strategic new investments are needed in human capital, research, and proven practices and a federal, state, and local partnership must be created that focuses national attention on redesigning our schools for the 21st century. The purpose of this partnership must be clear: to ensure our nation’s long-term economic competitiveness and national security by dramatically upgrading the skills of our graduates.

Signatories

Asia Society

Alliance for Excellent Education

Committee for Economic Development

Council of Chief State School Officers

National Association of Secondary Schools Principal

National Education Association

National Middle School Association

ⁱ Committee to Review the Title VI and Fulbright-Hays International Education Programs. *International Education and Foreign Languages: Keys to Securing America's Future*. 2007, National Academies Press: Washington, D.C.

ⁱⁱ OECD, 2008. *Education at a Glance – OECD Indicators*. OECD, Paris. Available: <http://www.oecdbookshop.org/oecd/display.asp?CID=&LANG=EN&SF1=DI&ST1=5KZN0WRKCDTG#MultiLingualSummaries>

ⁱⁱⁱ Committee for Economic Development. *Education for Global Leadership: The Importance of International Studies and Foreign Language Education for U.S. Economic and National Security*. (Washington, DC, 2006). Available: <http://www.ced.org>

^{iv} *Teacher Preparation for the Global Age: The Imperative for Change*; Longview Foundation; 2008

^v Jackson, T. High schools in the global age. *Educational Leadership*. 65(8), 2008: 58 – 62.

^{vi} Asia Society. *Going Global: Preparing Our Students for an Interconnected World*. New York: 2008. Available: AsiaSociety.org/Education

^{vii} *Putting the World into World-Class Education: State Innovations and Opportunities*, Council of Chief State School Officers, Asia Society, 2008.