

Public Policy Notes

Southern Early Childhood Association

Atlanta Schools Accused of Widespread Cheating on Tests

In a sad day for the state of Georgia, first term Governor Nathan Deal issued a press release on July 5, 2011 that outlined findings from the state's investigation into the 2009 administration of the CRCT (*Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests*) in the Atlanta Public Schools.

According to the press release, the investigation revealed:

- Thousands of children were harmed by the 2009 CRCT cheating by being denied remedial education because of their inflated CRCT scores.
- The investigation found cheating in 44 of the 56 schools exam-

ined. There were 38 principals of those 56 schools found to be responsible for, or directly involved in, cheating.

- The investigation determined that 178 teachers and principals cheated. 82 of the 178 confessed to cheating by helping students or changing the answers once the students handed in their test sheets.
- "Cheating was caused by a number of factors but primarily by the pressure to meet targets in the data-drive environment."
- "There was a major failure of leadership."



Governor Deal

"Nothing is more important to the future of our state than ensuring that today's students receive a first class education and integrity in testing is a necessary piece of the equation," said Deal. "When test results are falsified and students who have not mastered the necessary material are promoted, our students are harmed, parents lose sight of their child's true progress and taxpayers are cheated." Source: <http://gov.georgia.gov>

Promise Neighborhoods Grant Info Available

The 2011 Promise Neighborhood grant application guidelines are now available. \$30 million is available for this round of grant funding. These grants are designed to support community development and promote the well-being of poor children across the country. The communities are to be de-

signed around strong schools that enable children to learn, grow and succeed.

The 2011 guidelines focus on early learning components and programs for English language learners, as well as maintaining an emphasis on data driven projects.

PolicyLink has imple-

mented a **Promise Neighborhoods Institute** that will be following these grantees.

You can find links to the grant application and other information on their website, www.promiseneighborhoods.org

For more information on Promise Neighborhoods, see the Fall 2010 SECA Reporter.

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Texas Withdrawing from the Council of Chief State School Officers

In June 2011, the Texas Commissioner of Education, Robert Scott, announced his decision to withdraw Texas from membership in the organization. Texas will be the only state in the U.S. that is not a member. The Commissioner cited "no return on investment" as a rationale. (Dues are \$60,000 per year.) Source: blogs.edweek.org 6/22/2011

Making Children & Families a Priority

As the budget debates heat up in Washington, it becomes even more important to find sources of information that you can use, either at the state or federal level, to advocate for children.

First Focus is a “bipartisan child advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal budget and policy decisions.” They have just released a report, *Medicaid Works: A Review of How Public Insurance Protects the Health and Finances of Children and Other Vulnerable Populations*. Co-authored by two professors in the Department of Health Policy at George

Washington University, the paper in particular focuses on the “enormous success of Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) in:

1. increasing health insurance coverage among children,
2. strengthening access to medical health and developmental services, and
3. safeguarding the finances of low-income families and individuals.”

Key findings:

- Medicaid and CHIP are cost effective.



- Medicaid and CHIP are essential sources of coverage for individuals with serious health conditions.
- Medicaid and CHIP are pioneers for health system improvements.
- Medicaid and CHIP protect the finances of families struggling during hard times.

For a copy of the report, go to <http://firstfocus.net/resources>

Chiefs FOR CHANGE

The **Chiefs for Change**, a group of state school chiefs and leaders that share a “zeal for education reform”, have recently taken two positions that are noteworthy.

The group has endorsed the study that is being proposed of colleges of education and teacher preparation programs.

Evaluating Teacher Education Schools and NCLB

The proposed study has generated significant controversy and two SECA states, Georgia and Kentucky, have declined to voluntarily participate. (See the *May 2011 SECA Reporter* for a story on the study and new members of Chiefs for

Change.)

The Chiefs have also established six principles for reauthorization of NCLB, including:

- All schools, not just the lowest-performing schools, should be held accountable for the academic performance of all students.
- Accountability should recognize annual growth or learning gains, in addition to achievement.

For a complete list of the six principles, go to

http://www.excelined.org/Pages/Programs/Excellence_in_Action/Chiefs_for_Change.aspx

New Education Leader for Florida

With the departure of the Florida Commissioner of Education, Eric Smith, a new Commissioner was named on June 21, 2011.

Gerard Robinson, formerly the Virginia Education Secretary, assumed the position with unanimous support from the Board of the Florida Department of Education

“Gerard brings to Florida a long and remarkable set of accomplishments in

innovation and proven results that will help us continue putting children first, improving our schools and ensuring Florida has the best educated work force. His leadership as an experienced education reformer and advocate for school choice and closing the achievement gap is exactly what Florida needs to reach the next level of education reforms that will benefit both our students and the



Governor Rick Scott and Commissioner Gerard Robinson

businesses of our state,” Governor Scott said. Source: Virginia Education Secretary Advocate of More Charter School and Charter Opportunities. sunshinestatenews.com, 6/21/2011

A Failed Experiment: Georgia's Tax Credit Scholarships

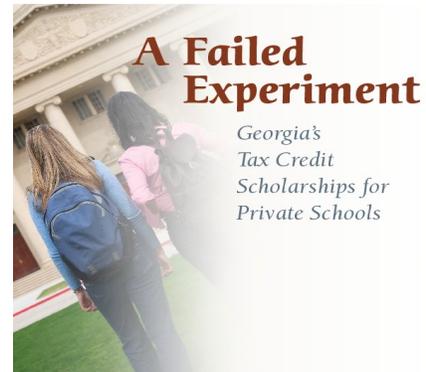
The Southern Education Foundation released a report in early June that documented the Georgia experiment in providing “**tax breaks to persons who donate to non-profits designed to pay for poor children to attend private K-12 schools.**”

The Georgia law permits taxpayers to reduce annual state taxes by up to \$2,500 for a joint return when they donate funds to a student scholarship organization (SSO), allowing a state tax reduction of \$1 for every \$1 diverted to a SSO. From July 2008 through 2010, \$72.1 million was diverted to these organizations.

The credits were established in House Bill 1133 in 2008 to “help parents who can’t afford private education transfer their children from low performing public schools to private schools for a better education.” According to the report, the tax credit has not supported poor children but has instead supported middle and upper income children in attending private school and has cost the state more than twice what it would spend on a student in a public school.

Arizona, Pennsylvania, **Florida**, Rhode Island, Iowa and Indiana are the other six states with a tax credit for private

school. Source: *A Failed Experiment*, The Southern Education Foundation, www.southerneducation.org



A Failed Experiment

Georgia's Tax Credit Scholarships for Private Schools

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INSIGHT INTO THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF INVESTMENTS IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION IN NORTH CAROLINA



North Carolina Suffers Reverses

After a grueling legislative battle that included a budget veto by Governor Perdue and an override of that veto by the

North Carolina General Assembly, funding for early childhood education in North Carolina has been seriously reduced.

Smart Start received reduced funding

levels (at one point it was on the block to be eliminated) and **More at Four**, the state’s pre-K program has been “devastated”, according to Stephanie Fanjul, director of the **North Carolina Partnership for Children**. “The budget completely dismantled **More at Four**. ...parents will now pay up to 10% of their gross income for the program.”

Additionally, the North Carolina Early Childhood Teacher Certification was also eliminated.

In response to these legislative defeats, the Insight Center for Community Economic Development has just produced a report that could serve as a template for other state advocates as they work to make sure that policymakers understand the economic value of early childhood education to their state.

For a copy of the report, go to <http://hugh.ncsmartstart.org/investing-in-our-workforce/early-childhood-education-is-good-for-nc-economy>

Early Learning Challenge Grant: Capped Funding Categories by State

The U.S. Department of Education is currently implementing the grant application and review process for the **Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Grant** program that was funded in the 2011 budget compromise. \$500 million will be available for the grants. The successful grantees will be awarded funds from December 31, 2011 to December 31, 2015.

The grant criteria includes a focus on 1) statewide quality rating systems, 2) early

learning standards, including tests for young children and 3) clear expectations for what teachers should know.

In a fairly unique “twist” to a federal grant program, the U.S. Department of Education has set budget caps for states by creating 4 funding level categories. *Applications that include budgets that exceed these caps will not be funded.*

The Categories for the SECA States

Category 1 –up to \$100 million- **Florida, Texas**

Category 2—up to \$70 million **Georgia, North Carolina**

Category 3—up to \$60 million **Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia**

Category 4 up to \$50 million **Arkansas, Mississippi, West Virginia**

Source: www.ed.gov/early-learning/elc-draft-summary/award-information

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Southern Early Childhood Association



"A Voice for Southern Children"

We're on the Web!
www.southernearlychildhood.org

How to Use This Newsletter

If you're interested in advocacy, one of the most effective tools that you can have is access to information. This newsletter is provided as a service to locate and share information that we think will be helpful to you in your work at the state level and to keep you updated on what's happening in public policy.

You'll find information that:

- **Compares your state to other SECA states**—how you're doing, what issues you have in common, what the hot topics are in your states.
- **Brings the national scene to your fingertips** and gives you a perspective on how national events might impact you...You'll also receive information about where to find additional information.

We hope you'll find it helpful. Children need you to be their "voice" in your community and state.

Third Grade Reading Goals: Targeting the Early Years

According to an article by Catherine Gewertz, states are increasingly looking at the early years as a way to help children meet proficiency reading goals by the 3rd grade. *"It's not unusual for states or school districts to consider 3rd grade reading proficiency a key goal; research suggests it's a pivotal skill.But the recent buzz of activity around early reading is notable for the way it looks backward from 3rd grade, articulating plans and requirements designed to ensure that pupils and teachers in preschool through 2nd grade are doing what's necessary to reach the desired reading results in 3rd grade."* Excerpted from *States Target Early Years to Reach 3rd Grade Reading Goals*, www.edweek.org. 6/2/2011.

The focus on reading proficiency at 3rd grade has been supported to a

great extent by recent research that has developed the link between 3rd grade reading skills, later academic performance and the likelihood of dropping out of school before completion. The Chicago Public Schools recently released a longitudinal analysis of children who were 3rd graders in 1996-97. The report concluded that *"Findings from this study are consistent with existing literature that emphasizes the importance of early reading ability for future educational success....Third grade reading level was shown to be a significant predictor of eight-grade reading level and ninth-grade course performance even after accounting for demographic characteristics and how a child's school influences their individual performance."* Source: <http://eyeonearlyeducation.org/2011/05/09/study-links-third-grade-reading-with-later-outcomes/>

The State of **Oklahoma** has taken a bold step forward by passing SB 346 which requires schools to screen K-3 pupils for reading difficulties and to provide help to those who aren't on track. Parents will be notified if their 3rd graders are reading below the "limited knowledge" level on state tests. If those skills aren't brought up to an acceptable level, children will not be promoted to the 4th grade. Source: www.oklegislature.gov

Another law passed during the same session requires that teachers of reading in kindergarten through 3rd grade incorporate into their teaching the five key elements of reading instruction identified in 2000 by the National Reading Panel: phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, fluency and vocabulary.