

The Scouting Report: Education Policy Challenges in America

As students across the country head back to school, it's time to focus on persistent challenges facing education in the United States: teacher quality and standards, the efficacy of charter schools, school underfunding and evaluating how the United States measures up to international standards. These will be key topics when Congress returns from recess and as the Obama administration lays out its priorities for education policy in the coming year.

On Wednesday, September 2, Brookings expert Russ Whitehurst, who directs the Brown Center for Education at Brookings, and Fred Barbash, senior editor of *Politico*, answered your questions on American education policy.

The transcript of this web chat follows.

Fred Barbash-Moderator: Welcome readers.

Our guest today is Russ Whitehurst, who directs the Brown Center for Education at Brookings. Russ is the former director of the Institute of Education Sciences within the U.S. Department of Education, is an expert on reading, teacher quality, student assessment, learning and instruction, education technology, and preschool programs.

Welcome Russ.

Let me start with a question about the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. I think we get more comments on that in POLITICO's Arena than on any other education-related topic. Can you update us on the status of that program?

12:29 Russ Whitehurst: Congress has agreed to continue the program for students who are currently recipients of DC opportunity scholarships. Currently there is no authorization to extend the program to new enrollees. This is still a political issue in Congress and there are ongoing bipartisan efforts to save the program.

12:29 [Comment From Michael Podgursky] The salary of the vast majority of teachers in America is determined by the number of years they've been teaching continuously in the same district or state, and their accumulation of graduate level course credits. Is this the compensation system we need to get the teachers students need?

12:30 Russ Whitehurst: No, we need market based reforms in the compensation of teachers that allow schools to offer teachers in hard to fill positions such as math or special ed the salary that is necessary to fill the position. Ditto for differential pay for highly effective teachers.

12:30 [Comment From Dan Goldhaber] Do you think that changes in career patterns, the fact that individuals today are much more likely to have multiple switches of jobs or occupations than in the past and are also likely to be more mobile, suggest a need to move away from teacher credentialing and pay systems that are so state based?

12:31 Russ Whitehurst: Yes. We need an easy way for accomplished teachers to have a nationally portable teacher certificate, and we need defined contribution, portable pension systems. It should be no more difficult for a k-12 teacher to move from a job in California to a job in New York than it is for a college professor.

12:31 [Comment From Bentley MacLeod] The administration seems to favor expanding competition in public education through introducing more charter schools and giving parents more choice in the school their child will attend. Are parents currently receiving enough information about school performance to empower them to choose the best school for their child?

12:32 Russ Whitehurst: No. School report cards under NCLB do not include sufficient information and they are not designed to be easily consumable. We need a number of measures that are linked to student outcomes, as well as student value-added achievement scores. We need guidance to users on which measures to attend to and why they are important. And we need to design-in ways to prevent these measures from being gamed.

12:33 [Comment From Elena] What do you think about the work Michelle Rhee is doing in the DC school system? She's been making big changes, not all well-received.

12:34 Russ Whitehurst: Michelle is committed to making the DC schools work, and is doing everything she can to achieve that goal. We all can applaud that, and I applaud most of the particulars of her efforts. She may need a better public relations staff.

12:35 Russ Whitehurst: There will be a lot of changes in Title I when the ESEA is reauthorized. Simplifying and not trying to micromanage from Washington are critical.

12:35 [Comment From Eric] What improvements are the most achievable in traditional schools?

12:37 Russ Whitehurst: With sufficient effort and investment we can assure that traditional schools operate well and are good enough to serve the needs of most children. Currently the variation in school performance is huge and unacceptable.

12:37 [Comment From Adrianna] Do you think the expansion of charter schools has positively influenced the American education system?

12:38 Russ Whitehurst: Yes. Competition and choice are as desirable in public k-12 education as in postsecondary education. Charters are providing some of that competition and choice.

12:38 [Comment From Jason] What are the key tenets of President Obama's education agenda?

12:40 Russ Whitehurst: The administration's education agenda seems to be based on pragmatism. As the president has said, "my attitude is to do what works for the kids." Thus we have charter schools, merit pay, national standards, and other popular reforms. I appreciate the administration's pragmatism, but the evidence around some of their reform strategies is relatively weak. I hope they will be willing to adjust as necessary once the evidence starts to arrive.

12:40 [Comment From Jen] What are your views on Arne Duncan's "Race to the Top" initiative...and why would something like that be controversial at all, as it seems to be in the education community?

12:41 Russ Whitehurst: Secretary Duncan has gotten a lot of mileage out of Race to the Top before a single dollar has been awarded. I think he's already accomplished the easiest part. Turning the winning applications into something worthy of the investment will be more challenging.

12:41 [Comment From Suzanne] What do you think about programs like Teach for America or The New Teacher Project? Are these effective in creating qualified teachers? Or are they just band aids on the issue of teacher competence?

12:44 Russ Whitehurst: The evidence of the effectiveness of TFA teachers is strong. They do better on average than traditional certified teachers. This effect is strongest in math. This should serve to shake up traditional certification programs for teachers - Teachers with a short summer boot camp doing better than teachers who have gone through a 4 year training program.

12:44 [Comment From Amanda] As a current student of education policy, I keep hearing that "NCLB is dead". Where do you think the administration SHOULD take NCLB, and what do you think is the likelihood of those efforts succeeding?

12:46 Russ Whitehurst: Many of the basic tenets of NCLB are very much alive and supported by the Obama administration, e.g., assessment, accountability, focus on student outcomes, use of evidence-based programs. The administration should hold on to the core while allowing states and local school districts the flexibility they need to perform without detailed intervention from Washington.

12:46 [Comment From Jill] Do you think the big expenses associated with 4-year colleges will raise the profile of community colleges?

12:48 Russ Whitehurst: The ever upward march of college tuition is not sustainable and will create many opportunities for entities that can deliver education more efficiently. This certainly includes community colleges. The challenge for that sector is the large proportion of students who start but don't finish.

12:49 [Comment From Shenan] At what point will we know whether the stimulus money has been effective in the school districts?

12:50 Russ Whitehurst: The major effect of the stimulus money is and will be the prevention of major layoffs of teachers. That can be measured by looking at what states would have spent on education without the infusion of federal cash. The other intent of the stimulus bill, to push the administration's education reforms, will be much more difficult to measure.

12:51 [Comment From Laura] There's a real push for quantitative outcomes analysis of students and teachers. Do you think it's really possible to quantify the quality of an education or a teacher? What are the limitations?

12:53 Russ Whitehurst: Yes, it is possible to quantify the effectiveness of teachers. We can measure their effects on student achievement, we can determine how they are regarded by students and parents, we can find out how their supervisors rate them. None of these are perfect, but they are used in other professions and are important in teaching as well.

12:53 [Comment From Della] When NCLB was signed into law, advocates for subject areas outside of reading and math were told not to worry--that their disciplines wouldn't be ignored or crowded out. With evidence that the crowding out did occur (CEP, others), they hoped reauthorization of NCLB would be an opportunity to raise and address the issue. Then that effort stalled. Now the NGA/CCSSO effort again focuses on math and English language arts, with the assurance that science and other subject areas are "coming", but it seems that these other subjects will have been waiting for at least 10 years for some attention, assuming it ever comes. Any comments or counsel for advocates of those subjects?

12:54 Russ Whitehurst: There is less evidence for crowding out than some suppose. See the NCES publication of last year. It will be important over time to develop measures of student success in a variety of subjects, but reading and mathematics are the place to start.

12:55 [Comment From Shenan] Do you agree with your colleague Tom Loveless that the smart children are being left behind?

12:56 Russ Whitehurst: We need value-added assessment systems that give schools as much incentive to increase the learning of gifted students as they have to teach low-achieving students. That said, there is little evidence from NAEP or other sources that performance levels have declined in the upper percentiles of students.

12:57 [Comment From Leigh] Miami, like many urban cities, has a core of underperforming high schools who have earned repeated "F" grades based on state assessments of student achievement. Local principals say recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers is an almost insurmountable obstacle given the competition for good teachers, esp. when competing with affluent suburban schools. So teacher quality isn't the only issue, it's how to get good teachers to teach in the schools where they are needed most? What strategies would you suggest to help overcome this issue?

12:58 Russ Whitehurst: Location pay is an important part of the solution, as is creating school environments and leadership that make individual schools inviting places for teachers even if their students have many challenges. We also have to look at union rules that allow more experienced teachers to choose their own school assignments.

12:59 [Comment From Tim] Due to recent recession-induced budget cuts, many teaching positions have been eliminated due to a combination of teachers being excessed and administrators not filling the void, especially at high-need urban public schools. This puts a strain on remaining teachers who inherit class sizes exceeding the maximum. What do you envision as the ideal solution to this problem in terms of maintaining educational standards with nominal support?

1:01 Russ Whitehurst: The question of class size is important. Policies that create larger class sizes in high-need schools than in lower-need schools should not be tolerated. On the other hand, we've traded off lower class sizes and a larger core of teachers for higher teacher salaries. This trade off should be reexamined.

1:02 [Comment From S.Sensei] How do you feel about the national rankings of high schools put out by magazines like 'U.S. News and World Report' that base the rankings almost totally on AP scores and enrollment in AP courses?

1:04 Russ Whitehurst: I would be in favor of the rankings if they were based on AP scores, but they are not. Rather the Newsweek ranking, the so-called challenge index, is based on the number of AP courses offered by high schools. All the credible evidence I've seen suggests that it is doing well in an AP course that offers a postsecondary advantage, not just being enrolled.

1:04 [Comment From Leigh] "Race to the Top" requires states to allow the use of student performance data in evaluating teacher and principal effectiveness, how likely is this effort to be successful given the likelihood of union opposition to the use of this data as is the case in NYC public schools where Joel Klein is in a heated battle with the union over removing incompetent teachers?

1:06 Russ Whitehurst: We are past the tipping point on the use of performance data in evaluating teacher and principal effectiveness. The questions now are how to do it well, and how quickly the laggards will get on board. The administration is very much in the right place on this.

1:06 [Comment From Chris Duco] Will the President's new education policies include the same strategies implemented by the President while a board member of the Chicago Annenberg Challenge with Bill Ayers at the time the current Sec Ed was CEO of Chicago Public Schools, the same strategies they stated were NOT designed to increase test scores or graduation rates but to "radicalize" the public school students?

1:07 Russ Whitehurst: I have no inside knowledge of this. Everything I've seen and heard from President Obama and Secretary Duncan suggests to me that they care very much about improving education for disadvantaged students.

1:07 [Comment From Raymond] Do you think teachers for electives and arts (especially music and art classes) should be held to the same standards as teachers for core subjects? It doesn't make much sense to me that teachers of the arts have to pass standardized tests and meet other requirements that have nothing to do with what they are going to teach.

1:10 Russ Whitehurst: We need a lot more flexibility in entry into the teaching profession. If a district needs to hire a band director and there is someone highly qualified to do that by virtue of past experience, then let the district hire. Likewise for technical subjects. Why can someone be highly qualified to teach physics at a local community college and not be hireable part time to teach at the local high school. Our whole credentialing system has much less to do with teaching competence than it should

1:10 [Comment From Guest] Is there a publically available source to get AP scores by school?

1:11 Russ Whitehurst: Not to the best of my knowledge. The College Board, which runs AP, guards its data well. The only source of publicly available information is their annual reports, available on their web page.

1:12 [Comment From Wes] Do you think American high schools are getting to be too competitive and stressful for kids?

1:13 Russ Whitehurst: Not in general, though some students have stress related problems. We live in a competitive world, and school is part of it. What is important is to do what we can to make sure that the competition is on things that are worthwhile for students and society.

1:13 [Comment From Maria] What are the best ways for USDE to ensure that schools and districts have, or can develop, adequate capacity to achieve the never-before-achieved goals established in NCLB? To piggyback on Leigh's question, when interventions for struggling schools include requirements to replace teachers or campus administrators, there is very little incentive for skilled and dedicated educators to risk their careers at such schools, and the destabilization of the teams inside such schools is propagated rather than solved.

1:16 Russ Whitehurst: One of the mistakes of NCLB was to require that schools achieve certain goals without there being a sufficient knowledge base on how to get the job done. We know much less about how to turnaround chronically low performing schools than we need to know -- see the IES practice guide, which is explicit about the low levels of evidence that exist on most of the recommended strategies. Realism would be a good recommendation for the reauthorization of ESEA.

1:16 [Comment From Tim] When Secretary Duncan headed the Chicago public schools, he was criticized as lowering standards to improve pass rates, that is compromising the process to achieve results. In fact, many urban schools have been found to engage similar methods to varying degrees, due to pressure on schools to achieve high performance marks. When and with whom will this passing of the buck stop? And how will the effects of communities full of illiterate high school graduates be handled?

1:18 Russ Whitehurst: The State of Illinois lowered standards on the state assessment, based on reports I've read. This wasn't Arne Duncan's doing though he benefitted in terms of apparent successes in the Chicago schools. If we are going to have high stakes assessments, we have to prevent their being gamed.

1:19 [Comment From Kenneth] I just read a New Yorker article on public school teachers in New York. Apparently, if a teacher is deemed incompetent, they remove them from a classroom immediately. But they keep them on payroll (for years sometimes) until they get a proper hearing. Talk about waste! What should be done about tenure?

1:21 Russ Whitehurst: I see no compelling reason for public school teachers to be tenured. The rationales for tenure, such as protecting teachers against political dismissals, can be negotiated on a point by point basis. What other profession in the U.S. that requires a BA degree for admission offers life time tenure after 2 or 3 years?

1:21 [Comment From James] Do you think US education has become too focused on testing? obviously, testing is an important measurement of progress, but isn't education about more than just passing tests?

1:22 [Comment From Maria] For "Guest," who inquired about accessibility of schools' AP scores, I would like to offer the suggestion that the individual check the web sites of various state departments of education. More than one state department makes the aggregate AP results and participation rates for each school available in some form or fashion. Texas is noteworthy in this regard.

1:22 Russ Whitehurst: Student assessments are important for managing education and holding educators accountable. We need other valued outcomes to be noticed as well -- graduation rates, college enrollment and completion rates, labor market outcomes are all important.

1:23 [Comment From Ron] What do you see as some of the key challenges facing education in America?

1:26 Russ Whitehurst: Providing a good enough education for all students is our challenge. The variability in performance among schools and teachers would be seen as outrageous in most other sectors of the economy. Would you want to get on an airplane on which you had to hope that your pilot was in the top quartile of performance if you were to have a good chance of getting to your destination? Would you want to visit a physician where your luck of the draw would have a substantial effect on your health? We need to do a MUCH better job of getting the fundamental processes of delivering education fixed and reliable.

1:26 [Comment From Mark Schneider] In the past, many charter school closings were driven by fiscal problems and other forms of mismanagement – but evidence suggests that authorizers are now taking the academic quality of their schools much more seriously as they debate renewal of charters. How can we support this movement? What kinds of data systems do authorizers need to be able to identify low performing schools? Do these systems exist—and with what degree of certainty can they help authorizers identify schools that need help and those that should be closed?

1:27 Russ Whitehurst: Make charter schools the poster children for data driven management by requiring or incentivizing states that authorize new charters to require that they collect longitudinal data on student performance. This would allow value-added computations that would enable states to identify those charters that are in the lower tier in raising student achievement. Charter schools are highly variable in the quality, just as are traditional schools. Charter schools are, however, easier to close. We need to have and use good data to close weak charter schools and to find out what variables are important in the success of the best charter schools.

1:29 Fred Barbash-Moderator: Thanks very much Russ. This was most useful and informative...and thanks to all our readers, with apologies to questions we could not get to.

We'll be back here next week...same time same place.

So long for now.