

Looking Ahead and Addressing Challenges

Quality education continues to be a vital component to the nation's long-term economic prosperity and recent economic gains. It is an investment that is valued highly by Americans, for both present needs and its future promise. The Department continues to support state formula grant programs while supporting the creation of models through competitive programs, including [Race to the Top](#), [Promise Neighborhoods](#), [Investing in Innovation](#) (i3) grants, and a redesigned [School Improvement Grants](#) program. Those commitments are bolstered by increasing the extent to which evidence is used in programs and strategic decision-making.

Going forward, the Department will build on what it has already established:

- state-driven accountability that demands progress for all children;
- high-quality early education for more low-income children;
- more flexibility for state decision-making;
- more support for principals and teachers to apply high standards to practice;
- reforming career education in high schools and community colleges; and
- reforming and simplifying the application process for student aid to help drive college affordability and completion.

Additionally, the Department will continue to strengthen the support systems necessary for all students to succeed. This includes promoting preschool access for all students, K-12 strategic reforms, and college affordability. Ultimately, the Department looks to create ladders of opportunity to help all students.

Goal 1. Postsecondary Education, Career and Technical Education, and Adult Education: Increase college access, affordability, quality, and completion by improving postsecondary education and lifelong learning opportunities for youths and adults.

Dramatically boosting completion rates for bachelor's and associate's degrees is essential for the United States to successfully compete in a global economy. A college education is one of the most important investments that Americans can make to increase the likelihood of higher earnings and lower the risk of unemployment. Unfortunately, for many low- and middle-income families, college is slipping out of reach. Over the past three decades the average tuition at a public four-year college has more than tripled, while a typical family's income has increased only modestly. Lodging, food, books, and other related expenses have also increased dramatically. More students than ever are relying on loans to pay for college.

Today, 71 percent of those earning a bachelor's degree graduate with debt, which averages \$29,400. While most students are able to repay their loans, many feel burdened by debt, especially as they seek to start a family, buy a home, launch a business, or save for retirement. As such, the Department continues to focus on efforts intended to make college more affordable and loan repayments more manageable by implementing initiatives from the President's Value and Affordability Agenda.

As noted elsewhere in this report, many of the Department's initiatives depend, in large part, on the extent to which states invest in higher education and on actions taken by states and institutions. The Department will use its available resources and programs, administrative

action, bully pulpit, technical assistance, and ability to convene stakeholders to drive collaboration and best practices to support states and institutions in making these investments.

Goal 2. Elementary and Secondary Education: Improve the elementary and secondary education system's ability to consistently deliver excellent instruction aligned with rigorous academic standards while providing effective support services to close achievement and opportunity gaps, and ensure all students graduate high school college- and career-ready.

The 2012 high school graduation rate—80 percent—is the highest in America's history. Graduation rate increases between 2008 and 2012 showed that an additional 100,000 Latino students and 40,000 African-American students graduated from high school. That is 140,000 students of color alone with a better chance of getting a good job, owning their own home, and supporting a family. Despite this achievement, the nation needs to push beyond 80 percent.

The adoption of internationally benchmarked college- and career-ready standards is the foundation to improving educational outcomes for all students. These standards must be coupled with high-quality formative and summative assessments to measure the extent to which students are mastering the standards. A challenge facing the Department over the next two years is supporting states both in their plans to implement these standards and aligned assessments for all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, and low-achieving students, and in their development and implementation of teacher and principal evaluation and support systems. As noted elsewhere in this report, the Department aims to address these challenges by developing and targeting technical assistance activities that will increase state capacity to leverage limited resources and by identifying and disseminating information on promising practices.

Goal 3. Early Learning: Improve the health, social-emotional, and cognitive outcomes for all children from birth through 3rd grade, so that all children, particularly those with high needs, are on track for graduating from high school college- and career-ready.

Every child should have the opportunity for a great start in life. According to recent [Civil Rights Data Collection](#) data, big opportunity gaps start at the very beginning of formal education. Nationwide, 60 percent of school districts have public preschool programs but 40 percent—almost 7,000 districts—do not offer these programs. Nearly 10,000 school districts today have a public, district-based preschool program, but more than half of those districts—57 percent—offer only part-day programs, and barely half of the school districts that have public preschool programs make them available to all children within the district.

Additionally, the most recent State Preschool Yearbook from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) shows fewer than 30 percent of 4-year-olds in the U.S. are enrolled in state-funded preschool programs; and for those who do attend, 41 percent were served in programs that met fewer than half of the NIEER quality standards benchmarks.

The Department will keep working to improve access to high-quality early learning through our implementation of the [Preschool Development Grants](#), support of RTT-ELC state systems of early learning, [Enhanced Assessment Grants](#) (EAG) grantees that are designing and

developing KEAs, and continued close partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services.

Expanding access to high-quality early learning programs and constructing, testing, and implementing assessment of early learning outcomes are challenging and resource-dependent initiatives. States are beginning the development of valid and reliable measures for KEAs. New measures and systems are expensive, and budget cuts could impact deployment. Additionally, EAG grantees that are consortia experience challenges in the coordination across states due to differences in their policies and procedures.

Goal 4. Equity: Increase educational opportunities for underserved students and reduce discrimination so that all students are well-positioned to succeed.

Identifying opportunity gaps is the first step that schools and districts should take to address educational inequities. The real power of the [Civil Rights Data Collection](#) lies not just in the numbers themselves, but in the real-world impact they can have when coupled with courage and the will to change. These data are providing—and will continue to provide—important markers and starting points for discussion within the Department and among education stakeholders. Further, as noted previously, the Department is focused on supporting innovation and efforts that demonstrate growth in student achievement.

Multiple Department programs aim to improve educational equity, and it can be challenging to ensure states and districts coordinate these efforts. Key barriers and challenges to aligning the work of these programs and improving education equity include sustaining reforms in schools after their SIG program grants end; addressing capacity challenges at state, district, and school levels; focusing on comprehensive turnaround efforts at the state and district level beyond the SIG program; ensuring alignment between SIG, RTT, ESEA flexibility, and other programs and initiatives; and accessing quality and completeness data that would allow others to define success.

Goal 5. Continuous Improvement of the U.S. Education System: Enhance the education system's ability to continuously improve through better and more widespread use of data, research and evaluation, evidence, transparency, innovation, and technology.

Through its mix of grants, contracts, and internal analytic work, the Department continues to support the use of research methods and rigorous study designs that provide robust evidence. Using evidence to award competitive grants requires a shift in culture and capacity-building across the Department and in the field. Although the Department utilizes [Regional Educational Laboratories](#) (RELs), the [Education Resource Information Center](#) (ERIC), and the [What Works Clearinghouse](#) (WWC) to make information about research and evaluation available, the Department has limited resources to provide technical assistance to applicants and grantees to support their understanding of evidence standards and conducting rigorous evaluations that would produce evidence of effectiveness.

In addition to its efforts to increase evidence-based decision-making, the Department also considers transparency, participation, and collaboration as vital to the success of improving the quality and accessibility of education. An important component of that commitment is the Department's Open Government Plan. The [Department's 2014 Open Government Plan](#) provides an update on existing programmatic work and highlights of Department actions to

achieve its goals of improving student achievement and educational opportunity. The flagship initiatives of the Plan include: A fully operational beta version of the [Education Data Inventory](#), a repository of data that the Department collects; early public participation and input in policy- and rule-making; a new version of the [Federal Registry for Educational Excellence](#) (FREE), making it easier to find digital teaching and learning resources; the Integrated Student Experience (ISE) initiative, resulting in increased financial aid awareness and a simplified application and servicing experience; and the Department's Disclosure Review Board (ED-DRB), which is responsible for the review and approval of the disclosure avoidance protections used to protect privacy in the Department's public data releases. Additionally, the Department launched an initiative called the [Future Ready District Pledge](#), a commitment by superintendents to develop and implement technology plans that would support a transition to digital learning.

Goal 6. U.S. Department of Education Capacity: Improve the organizational capacities of the Department to implement the Strategic Plan.

Recently, the Department participated in a series of government-wide benchmarking exercises, as a part of the President's Management Agenda, and the findings have been very useful in key areas, including technology, real estate, and financial management. As a result of the findings, comparisons to other agencies and identifying best practices, the Department's technology group has identified the potential for greater savings in certain service sectors and found objective confirmation for many of its cost-saving plans for the future, such as driving down specific network and e-mail storage costs by transitioning services to the cloud environment. This effort has also caused the Department to consider additional shared service arrangements that may help garner more efficiency and lower costs.

A major effort is underway to freeze and reduce the Department's occupied space footprint in facilities across the nation. The Department's space modernization initiative will help identify and gain efficiencies in various ways, including consolidating employees and work groups into existing spaces as facilities' leases expire, for projected rent savings; reducing space requirements and related rental per square footage rates; increasing the extent and impact of telework and other mobility strategies; and redesigning workspaces to reduce the need for isolated, individual spaces while adding more collaborative ones.

In financial management, the Department continues to assess its business processes to ensure that they are effectively and efficiently supporting the mission. Those activities include process re-engineering, enhanced automation, strengthening internal controls, and expanding the use of shared service solutions where practical.

Finally, greater emphasis and development for the management and supervision cadre is an essential element of the strategy to build capacity and infrastructure. The Department continues to explore and identify innovative training and development opportunities, while also looking for tangible ways to gauge the effectiveness and return on the investments in this area. Getting this approach right is critically important to the Department's ability to sustain consistent and continuous improvement, as well as safeguarding the ability to manage the knowledge, expertise, and functionality to deliver on its strategic mission and goals.

Reporting on Progress Made on Strategic Goals and Objectives: The Department continues to use tools and processes, such as quarterly performance reviews, to assess progress toward achieving strategic goals and outcomes. Additionally, the Organizational Performance Review contributes to the Department's data-driven performance discussions by

serving as a tool for principal offices to improve their efficiency and effectiveness by focusing on operational priorities and initiatives at the principal office level.

To support the tracking and reporting of progress against the goals and objectives, the Department provides regular updates to its data profile on performance.gov for key policy and programmatic topics. The effective implementation of the Department's strategic and Agency Priority Goals will depend, in part, on the effective use of high-quality and timely data, including evaluations and performance measures, throughout the lifecycle of policies and programs.

In addition, the Department's success in achieving its strategic goals is closely tied to its capacity and funding. In addressing capacity, the Department will invest in the continuous improvement of its workforce and employ comprehensive risk management to ensure prudent use of public dollars by mitigating risk through increased oversight and support of grantees and contractors.

The six Department *Strategic Plan* goals guide the day-to-day work of the Department's staff. This plan will help to align the administration's yearly budget requests and the Department's legislative agenda. Continuous improvement rests on ongoing cycles of assessing performance, examining data, and improving practices. Creating a culture of continuous improvement is at the heart of the Department's efforts to work with and support educators, administrators, and policy makers.

Accomplishing all of the priorities will require strong coordination and collaboration from Department staff working with Congress, partners at the state and local levels, and other stakeholders. This includes meeting numerous legislative challenges and acting under fiscal constraints that may impact the Department's ability to provide the necessary incentives and resources to increase quality, transparency, and accountability.