

When Governors Step Into the Picture (Converge Magazine Online, December 2006)

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There are so many moving components to education in any given state or between states and the Federal government, it is nearly impossible to address dropout rates, graduation rates, increased college attendance, or create more capable teachers and administrators. The answer to this dilemma may be in the building trades. The choice is between renovation and new construction. We all know that re-modeling an old house or constructing a new one can produce very different results. We also know that there is a difference between using a builder to design a complex house and hiring an architect.

Education belongs to the states. It is a public good in each state. Hanging in the balance are tangible goals such as tax revenue necessary to invest in state infrastructure and programs. On the other side of the scale are negative costs, the social costs of incarceration, expanding social service sectors, and declining innovation and new economic development. To solve these issues, a builder working on renovating tired school systems is not an answer.

The answer is a state level architect who can construct a clear path from kindergarten through college and into the workforce - one who can accommodate the quickly changing demographics of every state. The only office that can rise above the thousand potholes mentality and look at the whole education establishment in a state and do something about it is a Governor. Left to their own devices those further down the line, influenced by many competing interests, are incapable of looking at and acting on the whole picture.

The states that are thinking at the state level architecturally are finding two enabling factors: technology and human organization. There are clear efficiencies in using technology to not only collect and analyze data, but to apply what is known quickly and confidently to remedy problems, right down to individual students. But applying technology by itself is meaningless unless there are changes in the human organization that carries out education in all its many silos.

Kentucky, New Mexico, and Arizona have strong governors committed to PK-20-Workforce policies designed to use technology as an enabler. They are aware that the silos between different education segments and agencies must come down. The information highway has to turn into a coherent education network where policies, practices, and

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interactions can cross educational stakeholders as easily as an Interstate traverses neighborhoods.

The only way for that to happen is to work off of well crafted state education and human capital blueprints instead of a hundred back of the napkin sketches or random bills in legislatures. There is not enough money in state treasuries or local school district bank accounts to tinker on reforms. We are at a time when education has to be looked at as the most important state infrastructure, the one that will later pay to repair the roads, fund health care, and put people into jobs not prison. That's where the governor needs to come into the picture as the force behind each state's blueprint for success.

This year should be one in which the nation's governors move boldly. In announcing her first action as National Governors' Association chairperson, Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano stated that her goal is, "to educate our students to be innovators, and to carry that spirit of innovation through their university experience and into the workforce." Napolitano created a PK-20 Commission (pre-kindergarten through higher education) in Arizona to coordinate all the educational segments in that state and to drive toward a singular educational experience. "Here in Arizona, we're already making the investment today so our state can lead the global economy tomorrow and beyond," Napolitano said.

Similarly, in New Mexico, Governor Bill Richardson, a potential presidential candidate in 2008, has made education New Mexico's top priority. Like his neighbor in Arizona, the investment is a comprehensive package for students, integration of education units, and statewide technology. "New Mexico high school graduates must be armed to compete for excellent jobs, not just here, but nationally and internationally," said Governor Richardson after announcing a comprehensive high school re-design in May.

The organizational re-alignment to turn such statements into action is not easy. Kentucky, the longest on the PK-20-Workforce task, is now in a position to create a single technology, delivery and policy network spanning all of its state-funded stakeholders. This came to pass because State officers have worked diligently with all the education segment leaders over several years to build ownership in a single vision and a jointly owned operational plan. The next step for the Governors in this election year is to get their states to turn their bold blueprints into on-the-ground action.