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SECRETARY DUNCAN PROVIDES MORE DETAILS ABOUT PROPOSED FEDERAL INVESTMENT OF \$500 MILLION TO DEVELOP FREE ONLINE SOURCE HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE COURSES AND CURRICULA

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has provided more details about a proposed \$500 million federal investment to develop free online open source high school and college courses and curricula over the next ten years.

President Obama's American Graduation Initiative (AGI), which is incorporated into the **"Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act,"** recently passed by the House, would provide \$12 billion over the next 10 years, to improve community colleges and help students to complete a college degree. The AGI is intended to support progress toward achievement of the President's overarching goal, to have the United States, once again, be first in the world by 2020, in having the "highest proportion of college graduates in the world."

Also included in the AGI, is a proposal with potential "to have a lasting impact on the future of higher education," according to Secretary Duncan, who also wrote,

"The president is proposing to invest \$500 million over the next 10 years to create world-class online college and high school courses that will be available to all 24/7/365."

"Colleges, universities, publishers, other institutions and related consortia will be invited to compete to create state-of-the-art online courses that combine high-quality subject matter expertise with the latest advances in cognitive and computer sciences."

"Such courses will enable students to move through the material at their own pace. When students do not understand a particular lesson or concept, carefully designed assessments will identify the gap in their learning. They'll relearn the material and have another chance to demonstrate mastery."

"Such an open-source, easily accessible system of robust courses will produce the most profound equalization of access to cutting-edge knowledge and information since the creation of the public library. We will see the creation of new companies, perhaps even entirely new industries, situated squarely in the knowledge sector, which is so crucial to our national and global economic success."

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The Secretary envisions that colleges and universities would decide whether to grant college credit to students who exhibit “mastery” of the course content and skills. There could be proctored testing centers available to accelerate and accommodate student learning. Professors could use all or only part of the content of these courses in their own classes, says the Secretary, and the Department of Defense would have similar options for use in their classes for military personnel. Students could gain access to these free courses to learn on their own, to explore and successfully complete educational challenges that previously were unimagined.

The U.S. Education Secretary further describes “how an American president saw a challenge and turned it into an opportunity for all.... **By opening up the digital doorway to the best online higher education and high school courses available, we will provide millions of Americans with the knowledge and skills they need to advance** their education and succeed in our global society. As history has taught us time and again, everyone wins when we invest in the future of higher education...” and “**students who benefited from these free, open-learning resources become the next generation of American leaders.**”

This information has been excerpted from an article entitled “Moving College Into the 21st Century,” authored by Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education. It appeared on Thursday, October 1, 2009, on page 28 of the *Politico*, a Capitol Hill newspaper, in Washington, D.C.

This article is a likely political and policy signal that the Secretary and the Obama Administration truly support this small and lesser noticed provision in the House-passed “Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act,” and would like for the Senate to include a similar provision in its student financial aid reform legislation now under development.

S 1698, “THE GRADUATION PROMISE ACT,” IS INTRODUCED TO PROVIDE GRANTS TO STATES TO IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOLS AND GRADUATION RATES

On September 23, 2009, S 1698, “The Graduation Promise Act,” was introduced by Senators Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), Patty Murray (D-WA), Christopher Dodd (D-CT), Jack Reed (D-RI), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Robert Casey (D-PA), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Al Franken (D-MN), and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV). This bill is intended to provide grants to States to improve high schools and graduation rates, to ensure rigorous standards, to develop and implement effective school models for struggling students and dropouts, and to improve State policies to raise graduation rates. It would create Federal/State/local partnerships to improve high school graduation rates, and to help transform the lowest-performing high schools.

Senator Bingaman notes that:

- The U.S. “high school graduation rate has stagnated” at about 70%, with “graduation rates for students of color” even lower than that.
- “Federal education policy and funding have focused primarily upon elementary and postsecondary education.
- “Only about 8 percent of all Title I dollars go to high schools.”

- If all of the students in the class of 2009 had graduated “the nation’s economy would have benefited from nearly \$335 billion in additional income over the course of these students’ lifetimes.” Too few “young Americans are prepared to enter the workforce, which harms our economy and our standing in the world.”
- “Currently, only one-third of all students who enter the 9th grade will graduate with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college or the modern workforce. They are not receiving the kind of quality education that permits a seamless transition to a job or postsecondary education.”
- Research-based tools have identified “the high schools that are producing the majority of dropouts across the country... roughly 2,000... or 15 percent of all high schools have persistently low rates of grade promotion and graduation.” Yet a typical senior class in one of these schools has increased by 40% since these students entered high school four years before.
- Solutions and strategies that are research-based with evidence of producing successful results are known and available, says Senator Bingaman. These include:
 - “Restructuring schools into smaller, more personalized learning environments” to encourage greater student engagement.
 - “Sustained efforts to boost attendance” so that students “do not fall further behind.”
 - “Partnerships with community-based and education organizations” that “help facilitate successful school transformations.”
 - Combining such strategies “with high-quality curriculum and instructional improvements” facilitates improved student attainment and graduation success.
 - Transitional math and English help 9th graders to catch up academically.
 - Use of “challenging curricula” along with “tangible, contextual applications of learning rekindle” student interest.
 - Team teaching and professional development tailored to school needs “bolsters teachers’ effectiveness” with “students at risk of dropping out.”

Senator Bingaman advocates that the federal government move from “‘no child left behind’ to ‘every student a graduate.’” The **Graduation Promise Act** “will help build state and local capacity for secondary school improvement by providing states and local school districts with resources to identify and target high schools with the greatest needs.” **The bill focuses on providing resources for “states to develop differentiated high school improvement systems and for local districts and schools to take “locally-driven school improvement actions are based upon the amount and type of supports necessary to turn such schools around,” with accountability and transparency.**

Structure and Provisions of S 1698

S 1698 would authorize **\$2.44 billion annually to fund these activities with high schools that have “the lowest student achievement and lowest graduation rates.”** However, middle school students and high school students are the target group for improvement if they are in **grades 6 through 12.**

This Graduation Promise Act fund, the **High School Improvement and Dropout Reduction Fund**, would assist States and local school districts with **resources to identify high schools that have low student achievement and graduation rates and to transform them through interventions that are research-based.**

These funds would be distributed **through competitive grants to schools which partner** with business, their communities, and others. Together **proven dropout prevention strategies would be used**, such as **early college high schools, apprenticeships and mentoring**.

An **additional \$60 million** would be directed to **competitive grants to create and implement successful school models** for struggling students in traditional educational programs.

Johns Hopkins University research shows that there are approximately **2000 U.S. high schools**, about **12% of them**, which **produce over 50% of all high school dropouts and about two-thirds of all minority students who are high school dropouts, in the nation**. **High school graduation rates in these schools, generally are below 60%**. These high schools, identified by Johns Hopkins University, have been **dubbed “dropout factories.”** However, only about half of these high schools are eligible to receive ESEA Title I, Part A dollars under the current NCLB law. It is believed that even fewer such schools actually receive Title I funding.

The **Graduation Promise Act**, hence, **would channel a larger portion of federal funds toward secondary schools** reform than has existed previously. The hope is that focusing nearly \$3 billion total on turning around the lowest performing high schools with the highest dropout rates would result in significant improvement in the U.S. high school graduation rate.

NEW “WHAT WORKS CLEARINGHOUSE” REPORT FOCUSES ON HOW TO BETTER PREPARE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TO BECOME COLLEGE READY

The “What Works Clearinghouse” recently issued a new report entitled **“Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do.”** This “practice guide” provides five recommendations for policymakers, educators and administrators to initiate beginning in ninth grade, to help high schoolers become college-ready academically, and raise their college-entrance rate.

ACT (American College Testing Program) data released in August, 2009, indicates that **from the scores of the high school graduating Class of 2009**, there were **only 23% who were college-ready to earn at least a grade of “C” or better in freshman college courses, based on their ACT test scores in English, math, reading and science**. Though a larger percentage of students were considered to be college-ready in individual academic subjects, ACT states that a significant share of high school graduates would need remediation in all four subjects. **According to ACT, of high school graduates only 67% were college-ready in English, 53% in reading, 42% in mathematics, and 28% in science.**

The “What Works Clearinghouse” is part of the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. The five college-readiness recommendations from its new report for high schools, include the following:

- 1. Offer courses and curricula that prepare students for college-level work, and ensure that students understand what constitutes a college-ready curriculum by ninth grade.**

However, the report warns that first generation and low-income students are not as likely as other students to take and complete a rigorous college-readiness curriculum in high school. The report cites six exemplars of college-ready high school requirements. All six essentially require that students complete 4 years of English, 3 years of math, 2 or 3 years of science and of social studies, and 1 to 2 years of foreign language.

2. **Utilize assessment measures throughout high school so that students are aware of how prepared they are for college, and assist them to overcome deficiencies as they are identified.**

High school assessments are essential to identify which students are becoming college-ready academically, since 60% of all college students must take a remedial course as part of their admissions requirements. Such assessment data can be used by high schools to craft individualized education plans to help students improve their college-readiness.

3. **Provide students with adults and peers who build and support their college aspiration.**

There are strategies that can help students develop supportive relationships, such as mentoring relationships with adults and college students, participating in extracurricular activities such as debate clubs, career exploration and job-shadowing opportunities.

4. **Engage and assist students to complete critical steps for college entrance.**

High school students should prepare and take relevant college-entrance or admissions examinations, including 11th grade practice tests and actual exams in 12th grade. High schools can assist students to access these opportunities, guide them toward postsecondary education programs that align with their goals and qualifications, and help them with college applications.

5. **Increase information to and families' awareness of, college costs and financial aid, and assist students with college student financial aid applications.**

First generation and low-income families and students tend to lack information about college student financial aid, and tend to overestimate college costs. High schools can provide materials, and hold sessions to help students and families learn about such information earlier, rather than later, in a student's high school career.

The "What Works Clearinghouse" does recognize that educators, guidance counselors and parents all have multiple demands on their time and may lack adequate knowledge and information to effectively help students navigate pathways to college readiness. But the report offers some strategies and solutions to help with these situations.

To access the "What Works Clearinghouse" report, please visit:

http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/higher_ed_pg_091509.pdf

GAO REPORT UPDATE ON USE OF ARRA ECONOMIC STIMULUS FUNDS FOR EDUCATION AND STATES DESIGNATED "AT RISK"

ELS reported, in its October 1, 2009 Federal Update, on the September, 2009 federal General Accountability Office (GAO) report to Congress, entitled "Recovery Act Funds Continue to Provide Fiscal Relief to States and Localities While Accountability and Reporting Challenges Need To Be Fully Addressed." The U.S. Department of Education designated the States of California, Illinois, Michigan, Texas plus Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia as "at risk," and in line to receive technical assistance related to use of their ARRA education funds, accountability and reporting, as a result of GAO investigations and auditing.

Reports are that some California local school districts have yet to begin to use their ARRA economic stimulus funds for education (SFSF, IDEA Special Education, ESEA Title I, Part A) even though the State has made such funds available to them. Of 10 California districts reported on by GAO auditors, cash balances of economic stimulus education dollars ranged from \$4.5 million to around \$135 million. The State is now pilot-testing a program to monitor district ARRA-related cash balances, and is reporting progress.

The California State Department of Education has said that in its pursuit of distributing ARRA funds quickly, to respond to national economic difficulties and the State's budget problems, it may not have recognized that local districts were not yet ready to spend the monies, because they were awaiting related U.S. Department of Education guidance.

The State of Michigan believes that its "at risk" designation is due to the large size of the State, and is working with the U.S. Department of Education to implement ARRA education guidance. The Texas Department of Education also, apparently was told that it was "at risk" and would receive technical assistance due to the fact that it was a large State. Washington, D.C. has been designated as at "high risk" for all federal education grants for three years, since 2006.

The U.S. Department of Education reportedly also has designated 12 more States as "at risk," regarding ESEA Title I, Part A use. These States include:

Arkansas	Idaho	New Jersey
Colorado	Louisiana	New York
Delaware	Massachusetts	North Carolina
Florida	Missouri	Oklahoma

Again, the required ARRA reports, due on October 10, 2009 to the federal government on funds received and their use, should provide increased data, transparency, and accountability on the impact that ARRA education funds have had and will have.