

Education TURNKEY Systems, Inc.

256 North Washington Street
Falls Church, Virginia 22046-4549
(703) 536-2310
Fax (703) 536-3225

MEMORANDUM

DATE: February 25, 2016
TO: TechMIS Subscribers
FROM: Charles Blaschke and Dr. Suzanne Thouvenelle
SUBJ: Proposed FY 2017 Budget; Opportunities in ESSA Transition Guidance; ESSA Impact on IDEA; Opportunities in State Assessment Changes; and Related Items

The highlights of the President’s FY 2017 budget request are covered in our first Special Report, which suggests some opportunities that could exist this year and next, even if Congress disregards the proposed funding levels for major programs. The proposed priorities also suggest what types of interpretations will be reflected in the Obama-proposed regulations implementing the new ESSA, which could have significant implications in certain areas (e.g., SNS, Title IV) for many TechMIS subscribers.

Our second Special Report focuses on the February USED guidance for the 2016-17 transition from state waivers in August 2016, back to NCLB, and then to ESSA full implementation in September 2017. It suggests a number of opportunities for firms with those districts which wish to begin implementing some new ESSA provisions immediately and/or taking advantage of old NCLB “flexibilities” after state waivers run out in August for 42 states. Such opportunities exist in “freed-up” Title I funds in those districts dropping SES 20% set-asides; by taking advantage of major funding increases in Priority schools (both SIG for two-year budgets and Title I) in 2016-17; and in “identified” districts implementing previous USED guidance “flexibilities” regarding which are now in ESSA provisions, thereby reducing previous resistance from SEA officials.

Many of the Washington Update items also address the impact of the new ESSA in other areas (e.g., Title II, IDEA, and Title III) as noted below:

- **Page 1**
New USED Guidance Allows Some Existing Federal Funds Under NCLB During the Transition to ESSA to Be Used to Reduce Unnecessary Testing Time and Improve Quality of Assessments, Which Have Implications for Firms With Products Aligned to

Current State Tests

- **Page 2**
Changes in States' Assessments Presents Challenges for Some Publishers of Instructional Content
- **Page 4**
ESSA Promotes or Allows Joint Funding Between IDEA and Title I-II for Products and Service Purchases
- **Page 6**
New Obama Priorities for English Language Learner (ELLs) Will Be Reflected in Next Round of Competitive Grants of Title III National Professional Development Competition
- **Page 7**
Trickle-Down Happens in Kindergarten, Too, Which Has Direct Implications for ECH Publishers
- **Page 8**
ESSA Will Impact Current Teacher Quality Policies in Several Ways
- **Page 9**
Early Education and Child Care Made Gains in Many States, But in Others Lost Ground
- **Page 11**
A number of miscellaneous items are also addressed including:
 - a) Under the new ESSA, the formula for allocating the \$2.3 billion Teacher Quality grants to states (i.e., Title II) would allocate relatively more money than in the past to states with relatively higher poverty counts versus population.
 - b) Education Week's Straight Talk blog (January 19th) reported an analysis by the influential American Enterprise Institute (AEI) that identified the decline in the number of public high schools offering advanced placement (AP) courses between 2008 and 2012; and AEI recommends that states offer AP coursework for students online.
 - c) The December *School Marketing Newsletter*, published by Bob Stimola, reports that anxiety over technology is growing.
 - d) President Obama has announced his Computer Science for All initiative, proposing \$4 billion over three years in the FY 2017 budget for states, and \$100 million to districts over a five-year period.

- e) The Washington Post reports that the District of Columbia State Board of Education has approved a resolution that would allow students who pass the GED exam to receive a high school diploma.
- f) A recent survey identified several strategies which were found to be effective for improving mathematics instruction in states implementing Common Core standards and using consortia assessments.
- g) A recent study which examined test scores of ELLs identified traits of districts that are producing stronger academic outcomes for ELL students.
- h) According to the Associated Press, the Walton Family Foundation has pledged to spend \$1 billion over the next five years on charter school activities, compared to about \$400 million over the last 20 years for charter schools in low-income communities.
- i) The Washington Post (October 30th) reports that several major retailers and fast food restaurants are partnering with the GED Testing Service to provide free GED prep and testing for employees who lack a high school diploma beginning this year.

Special Report:
**The President's FY 2017 Budget Request, Which is Designed More to
Perpetuate His Legacy Rather Than Implement the New ESSA,
Has Language Suggesting Some Opportunities Which Could Exist
Even if Congress Disregards the Proposed Funding Levels**

*A Technology Monitoring and Information Service (TechMIS)
Special Report*

Prepared by:
Education TURNKEY Systems, Inc.
256 North Washington Street
Falls Church, Virginia 22046-4549
(703) 536-2310 / (703) 536-3225 FAX

February 25, 2016

Even though the proposed FY 2017 budget calls for a 1.9 percent increase in overall USED discretionary spending, most of the increases would go to new or previously-rejected initiatives by Congress, which are designed to bolster Obama's legacy among civil rights education reform advocates, among others. At the same time, the budget would level-fund large formula programs, which formed the backbone of the new ESSA and IDEA. In a sense, the numbers associated with the proposed increases are not as important as language supporting several of the Administration's priorities, which could possibly receive some funding as a first step in building his legacy. These offer opportunities for some TechMIS subscribers. On the other hand, language in the budget document also suggests some of the Administration's interpretations of provisions in the new ESSA, which also could have implications. Some of these have direct relevance to many TechMIS subscribers and are described below.

The largest formula program, Title I, would "on paper" receive a \$450 million increase; however, the budget narrative does not admit that the so-called "increase" is about the same \$450 million amount as the School Improvement Grant now included as part of Title I, but would no longer be funded under ESSA. As Education Week's Politics K-12 blog (February 9th) stated: "The request just adds the former SIG money into the broader Title I program." The budget document only states, "A portion of the increase would provide supplemental funds to address the challenge of turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools." And in fact, what the budget document also does not state is that under ESSA, the 4% state set-aside for "school improvement" will have increased next year to 7%, which in effect could mean because of a larger potential SEA set-aside withholding, LEAs could in fact receive less Title I funding next year than they will be receiving this year.

It would appear that even if the proposed funding level is adopted, the major opportunities in

Title I over the next couple of years will likely be created by the new flexibilities in ESSA relating to supplement-not-supplant (SNS) requirements and schoolwide program opportunities (see January TechMIS Washington Update). The budget document does address the opportunities in the 43,000+ Title I schoolwide programs serving approximately 95 percent of participating students; and it also does not address the supplement-not-supplant (SNS) flexibilities, which suggests during the ongoing negotiated rulemaking process, the Obama Administration might not support the strict language in the ESSA provision and possibly disregard the numerous prohibitions against USED regulating based upon its interpretations.

The IDEA special education grants to states would be level-funded at \$11.9 billion providing an average per-pupil expenditure of \$1,777 (over the “regular” almost \$11,000 per-pupil average allocation) for 6.7 million students ages three through 21 served in special education programs. Some of the other smaller programs under the total \$13.1 billion request for all special education programs would receive some increases, which could provide opportunities. The Preschool Grants program would receive a \$35 million increase to a total of \$403 million to provide special education and related services to children ages three through five. In order to encourage districts to allocate more of their 15 percent IDEA set-aside for Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CEIS) to children ages three through five, the Administration is requesting “a waiver of some of the reporting requirements in order to reduce the burden on LEAs who opt to exercise this flexibility for children three through five.” The estimated amount currently provided per child ages three through five under this program is \$535, serving 750,000 students; this could result in a total increase of a combined CEIS/RTI funding under the 15 % set-aside plus the \$535 per-child allocation to be more than \$1,000 additional funding per child in many instances.

For the new ESSA Title IV Part A Student Support in Academic and Enrichment Grants, which is a “consolidated block grant” of about 50 (e.g., some are “old” and/or not recently funded) programs, the budget request calls for \$500 million for 2017 which is more than the \$250-300 million currently appropriated for all of the 50 consolidated programs; this is certainly less than the \$1.6 billion authorized level under ESSA. While many technology advocates, including some TechMIS clients, were initially “excited” about prospects under the new Title IV, as up to 60 percent of such funds could be used by districts for technology infrastructure, devices, software, content, instructional-related materials, and professional development. However, districts had to receive a formula grant of at least \$30,000 before such conditions kicked in, and few would receive that minimum under the FY 2016 budget levels (\$250-300 million) for the consolidated programs. And, even with the \$500 million request a formula-based allocation for the vast majority of LEAs according to the budget document would be “insufficient to support meaningful uses of the funds.” As a result, the Administration requested that the \$500 million include “appropriate language permitting states to make subgrants to LEAs on a competitive basis to set a minimum award amount of \$50,000 per year for up to three years, and to give priority to projects supporting specific state-selected authorized activities.” The particular \$500 million request for Title IV could fall on receptive ears in Congress, as the “block grant” is one of its Congress’s priorities, although the stipulation requiring the use of competitive grants of \$50,000 for districts to apply for within the parameters in the priorities determined by the states makes support questionable from Congress and influential groups like AASA and NSBA, which

dislike competitive grants with its state “strings.”

For another one of the President’s priorities, the Administration is calling for a \$100 million increase to \$350 million for Preschool Development Grants, which ESSA transfers the funding for joint operations to the Department of HHS. The increase would continue the state grants funded initially in FY 2014 to create/expand high-quality preschool programs to serve four-year-olds. As noted, other preschool programs funded under IDEA would also receive slight pre-K funding increases. While the ten-year \$75 billion “Preschool For All” initiative to be funded out of mandatory funding is proposed again, it is not likely to be funded by Congress.

The Administration is also proposing increases for two of its “holdover” priority programs, which have been included under different names under ESSA. The i³ program, now referred to as the Education Innovation and Research Program, would receive a \$60 million increase to \$180 million to fund development, validation, and scale-up projects involving practices and innovations ranging from “promising” to “proven.” As the budget document states, “Furthermore, this investment would support implementation of ESSA provisions requiring states and school districts to use evidence-based interventions in schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) and targeted support and improvement (TSI).” Under a new Administration, opportunities for for-profit organizations to participate directly could possibly increase, but that is unclear. The Promise Neighborhoods Obama priority under ESSA would get a \$55 increase, totaling \$128 million in order to fund 15 new awards to local partnerships to provide achievement-oriented and “systems of support” to students in “high-risk” communities.

Without an explanation in the budget document, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers proposed budget would lose \$166 million scaling back to a total of \$1 billion. Under the Obama Administration, the priority in the 21st CCLC which was initially “before and after-school” programs has turned to “expanded learning time” (ELT), which the budget document states, “Is an evidence-based strategy for improving student achievement.” Because the Obama Administration placed a low priority on 21st CCLC, the Senate GOP attempted to include 21st CCLC in the Title IV Consolidated Block program, but at the last moment as a result of opposition from the Afterschool Alliance and similar groups, it was kept at a separate funding stream. Incidentally, while the Obama Administration claimed to support STEM-related activities by earmarking portions of other grant programs for such activities, it never supported after-school programs even though it is one of the fastest-growing opportunities for STEM-related education, as we noted in our October 2015 Special Report.

The President has proposed a \$4 billion mandatory funding for over three years for Computer Science for All grants for states to ensure that all high schools offer one rigorous computer science course (only an estimated 25 percent do now) and the development of evidence-based STEM curriculum and related professional development. \$100 million is proposed for a Computer Science for All development grants initiative to promote innovative strategies in K-12 to identify and test computer science instructional models, especially for students in under-served communities and groups under-represented in STEM fields. The \$4 billion mandatory

funding effort is clearly for the Obama legacy scrapbook with the smaller \$100 million effort possibly receiving some funding as some Congressional support might be expected even though budgets will be under close scrutiny (see related Washington Update).

One other new initiative, Stronger Together, to be funded by \$120 million in new funding, would be designed to promote socio-economic integration within/across districts. As Education Week reports, groups such as the Council of Great City Schools has already expressed their concerns in any such new money for integration should be across racial lines rather than socio-economic and that any such increases should be provided for Title I.

In two other areas, Charter and Magnet Schools, the budget calls for increases of \$17 and \$18 million for the \$350 and \$150 million respective current programs. Both programs, particularly charter schools, have received bipartisan support in the past and could receive some of the increases. However, the budget document argues that such funding increases should be used to improve outcomes for low-income students through socio-economic integration as both programs support “parent choice.”

Under the ESSA category of Expanding Support for Teachers and School Leaders, the \$2.25 billion reauthorized Title II Teacher Quality program would receive slightly less, but with more flexibility on how the money should be allocated and spent (see related Washington Update). Under the proposed \$250 million reauthorized Teacher Incentive Fund, now called Teacher and School Leader Incentive Grant, a 9% increase would allow grants to be awarded not only to traditional eligible grantees, but also consortia subgroups with non-profit as well as for-profit agencies “to develop, implement, improve, and expand human capital management systems and performance-based compensation that focus on recruitment, development, and retention of excellent educators in high schools...”

Within the context of the recently-reauthorized Workforce Investment Opportunity Act and the pending reauthorization of the Perkins Career and Technical Education (CTE) Act, the President’s budget requests \$75 million for a new “American Technical Training Fund,” a competitive grant program administered jointly with the Department of Labor. It would support the development and expansion of “innovative, evidence-based, tuition-free, short-term, or accelerated job training to increase the number of students completing degree programs that enable low-income youth and adults to enter and complete career pathways that lead to jobs in high-demand industries.” The overall CTE request would get a \$77 million increase or almost 7% over the 2016 level to \$1.2 billion. The total CTE program would be reauthorized following the Administration’s blueprint for “Transforming Career and Technical Education,” which was released in April 2012.

The President’s proposed budget released during this election year also calls for an increase in formula grants to states for English Language Learners from \$737 million to \$800 billion. It is important to note that the budget document states that the “Proposed \$63 million increase would help states and school districts meet the education needs of growing numbers of ELL students enrolled in their schools including meeting challenging state academic content and student

academic achievement standards.” This is in addition to an earlier statement of the intent of the program to use funds to “implement evidence-based language instructional programs designed to help ELL students attain English language proficiency.” As we discussed in the last TechMIS Washington Update, California recently included a requirement in its state adoption for ELL materials that they not only teach English language proficiency, but also academic content. In addition to issues of supplement-not-supplant, the new California requirements have significant implications for some TechMIS subscribers. It would appear that the Administration is taking into account the California decision in proposing language for the \$800 million ELL funding stream next school year.

Special Report:
**USED Issues Transition Guidance for 2016-17 School Year
on Supplemental Education Set-Aside/Parent Choice and
School Improvement Grants**

*A Technology Monitoring and Information Service (TechMIS)
Special Report*

Prepared by:
Education TURNKEY Systems, Inc.
256 North Washington Street
Falls Church, Virginia 22046-4549
(703) 536-2310 / (703) 536-3225 FAX

February 25, 2016

On January 28, USED issued a “Dear Colleague” letter on the general use of FY 2016 formula funds for school year 2016-17 and the exceptions which are noted below. Grants paid to states, and in turn, to districts for school year 2016-17 will follow the current formula allocations, which means states and districts will continue to operate under the plans, procedures and requirements that are in place for this school year 2015-16. The exceptions relate to school and LEA interventions and supports for English language learners, among others in states operating under ESEA state waiver flexibility (approximately 42 states and the District of Columbia).

During 2016-17, Priority schools must continue to implement interventions that are applicable to such schools. The state can continue to serve existing Priority and Focus schools for next school year or “refresh” their list by March 1st. States are supposed to indicate which option it plans to use by emailing USED by January 29th. This means that an existing Priority school or a new Priority school on the list can operate as a schoolwide program taking advantage of its flexibilities even though the school has less than 40 percent poverty. It also means that the district can allocate funds disregarding poverty rankings and provide more funds to these schools, most likely a Priority schools which have “the greatest need,” thereby increasing the amount of Title I per-pupil allocations. It is important to emphasize that even though the SIG program is not included in the new ESSA, for the remaining part of this year, the FY 2015 budget, which has yet to be allocated, and the FY 2016 budget for SIG funding for 2016-17 will be allocated thereby most likely increasing the amount of funding for existing Priority schools which receive both Title I and SIG funding. According to USED, more guidance is expected shortly on school improvement programs during its last “official year of funding.” This additional guidance is likely to stipulate that for any new Priority schools on the list, funds from the FY 2016 appropriations for school year 2016-17 must be used for interventions that are evidence-based, probably using the new definition of “evidence-based tiers” in ESSA (see related Washington Update).

The “Dear Colleague” guidance also addresses “new” flexibilities immediately for states without waivers (California, Iowa, Montana, North Dakota, Nebraska, Washington, Wyoming, and Vermont). As Education Week’s Politics K-12 blog notes, “Those states can look forward to additional guidance from the Department on how to craft their interim plans.” Specifically, these states have the option of continuing the 20 percent set-aside for SES and school choice currently under NCLB, or to “develop and implement a one-year transition plan for ensuring that their LEAs provide alternative supports for the students eligible for supplemental educational services for the schools with the greatest need (e.g., schools with large numbers or percentages of students eligible for SES).” In California, the amount in contention, for which a separate waiver had been requested from USED over the last two years, is worth about \$220 million which heretofore was set aside for SES; the California waiver request was approved in January separately from this “new” guidance or any future guidance. More information on the particulars of the California request will be included as information becomes available.

For English language learners (ELLs) during the 2016-17 school year, states must “continue to provide those LEAs with corresponding supports and interventions in the remaining months of 2015-16 school year and the 2016-17 school year.” The guidance eliminates the previous accountability requirements for ELLs meeting Annual Measurement Achievement Objectives (AMAOs) and requires states to “freeze district accountability under Title III on the most recent AMAO calculations.” The relatively greater flexibility changes relating to ELLs will kick in during the full year of ESSA implementation beginning in September 2017, which will depend upon, to a large extent, the results of the ongoing regulatory development process.

The guidance also reiterates that the NCLB “highly-qualified” provisions regarding teachers are not required to be implemented in 2016-17 school year; however, it states that the “State Plans to Ensure Equitable Access to Excellent Educators” which each state had to submit in 2015 to ensure that “poor and minority children are not taught at higher rates than other children by inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers remain in effect for the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years.” While USED enforcement powers have been greatly reduced under ESSA, it will likely rely most heavily on long-time civil rights laws for enforcement by its Federal lawyers and auditors at USED and in other agencies (see related Washington Update).

Several implications and possible opportunities for some TechMIS subscribers are suggested as a result of this new guidance.

Regarding the flexibility for the 20 percent SES or school choice set-aside, most of the eight non-flexibility waiver states will likely opt not to continue with the set-aside and come up with alternative ways of providing interventions and supports for “identified” schools. A number of the waiver states which, for whatever reason, continued providing SES and school choice under the set-aside since 2012-13 (e.g., Florida continued as a result of state legislative action) will also opt for alternatives. If a district decides to discontinue tutoring and school choice, the district must follow the state alternative plan, which is allowed for the 2016-17 school year, and which must be approved by USED by March 1st. The plan would “put a premium on schools where a

large percentage or a large number of students are falling behind,” as reported by *Politics K-12*. Additionally, USED has evidently also stipulated that the state plan must have gotten input from parents, teachers, students, districts, and others and it “must explain just how the state plans to help students succeed academically.” As noted in the Education Week article, the bottom line is that such guidance will likely result in even more funds being allocated to Priority schools receiving SIG funding for 2016-17 or high schools “with the greatest need.” USED has been fairly consistent in targeting additional funding wherever possible from different sources on Priority schools, many of which may be in their third, fourth, or fifth year, as noted above.

The amount of “freed-up” money for discontinuing the 20 percent Title I SES set-aside could be more than \$500 million and provide opportunities for TechMIS companies to “partner” with districts providing intervention products and professional development and other support, while districts operate their own tutoring and related programs.

Regarding opportunities under the SIG program, during its last official year districts will be required to provide lists (by March 30th) of Priority schools to be served, using not only FY 2016, but not yet allocated FY 2015 funds. Most will likely continue to serve existing Priority schools using the recent Congressional amendments allowing three additional interventions (i.e., whole school reform, state-determined, and pre-K) and allowing such schools to be continued for the fourth and fifth year before exiting (only three-year grants were made available previously). It is likely that the FY 2016 SIG allocations will stipulate that any interventions will have to be “evidence-based.” States might come up with new “state-determined” lists of such interventions.

One other opportunity not addressed would be increased likely use of flexibilities in NCLB September 2, 2009 regulations (see September 15, 2009 TechMIS report). These provide increased flexibility for districts “identified for improvement” to use Title I funds under certain conditions to train all teachers (not just those in Title I schools) in subject areas, which caused the district to be “identified”; another flexibility allows tutoring and/or related products purchased and used in Title I programs to be used in non-Title I schools without violating supplement-not-supplant (SNS) provisions (i.e., which is similar to the intent of the new ESSA SNS provision). More districts will be “identified for improvement” in the 42+ waiver states when they once again go under NCLB provisions on August 1st for 12-14 months. In the past, where SEAs may have resisted districts taking advantage of such opportunities for use of Title I funds, this resistance for the school year 2016-17 will likely be minimal because of these and related flexibilities now included in ESSA. Please call Charles directly if you have any questions about taking advantage of such opportunities.

Washington Update

Vol. 21, No. 2, February 25, 2016

New USED Guidance Allows Some Existing Federal Funds Under NCLB During the Transition to ESSA to Be Used to Reduce Unnecessary Testing Time and Improve Quality of Assessments, Which Have Implications for Firms With Products Aligned to Current State Tests

In his February 2nd letter to Chief State School Officers (CSSO), Acting Secretary John King provided additional guidance about “how existing Federal funds under NCLB and still in effect at least through the 2016-17 school year may be used to eliminate redundancy and ensure efficacy and quality of assessments...we plan to issue revised guidance with regard to funds that are made available for the 2017-18 school year under the provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by ESSA.” The Administration’s so-called “Testing Action Plan” includes a set of principles and steps, which can be taken to eliminate redundant and low-quality assessments (in part, to reduce parent “opt-outs”) and ensure improved outcomes and equity. The principles and steps include these:

- the testing strategy is well designed to ensure assessment outcomes identify what students know, but also inform and guide additional teaching supports and interventions;
- assessments are fair measures of what all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners, are learning and identifies

which schools and students may need targeted interventions and supports;

- assessments should be time-limited to balance instructional time and high-quality assessments (i.e., whether each assessment serves an essential role); and
- assessments should measure skills and knowledge across the college- and career-readiness standards that elicit complex student demonstrations of knowledge and provide accurate measures of student achievement and growth.

The guidance provides numerous examples of how Title I, Title II, Title III, and Title IV funds could be used now to implement the Testing Action Plan, noting that other Federal funds may also be allowed to do so. These include, among others:

- Districts may use Title I funds “off the top” of their Title I allocations to help educators learn to manage and analyze student data to improve instruction and decision-making for school improvement efforts, including how schoolwide programs could develop a data system to track student progress
- Title IIA funds can be used to provide professional development for teachers to develop formative and interim assessment items, including performance tasks, for students to do complex work in the real world and/or to help promote teacher collaboration and interpretation of results of assessments to understand student strengths and weaknesses and how to improve student instruction.

- Title III funds could be used for professional development to help teachers develop new interim formative assessments aligned to states' English language proficiency standards in both English language proficiency and academic achievement in core academic subjects (e.g., see example in the California-related item).
- Districts may use Title I funds to improve dissemination of easy to understand diagnostic reports to parents to increase student participation and state assessments and reduce opt-outs.
- To improve technical quality of state assessments and decrease staff time, Title I funds can be used to engage researchers, technologists, and innovators within the assessment community to develop more appropriate assessments of a high-quality nature.

As the new guidance notes, these are “just a few examples of allowable uses of Federal grant funds to support the reduction and improvement of student assessments.” The implications could be very significant for certain firms, which: a) have instructional programs aligned with current tests which could be eliminated or modified; b) have embedded formative assessments, which, for example, are performance-based, and could be actually used and/or adopted by states to be used as benchmarks or “cumulative/summative” assessments; and offer professional development in the use of assessment data to inform instruction, for example.

It is likely that many states are already using such allowable funds to implement their own state plans, so timing is important for firms to contact appropriate SEA officials

indicating their interest in participating and/or partnering with the state in such areas to protect or enhance their vested interests.

Changes in States' Assessments Presents Challenges for Some Publishers of Instructional Content

The trend of states changing their statewide accountability assessments, which began before the passage of ESSA, is gaining momentum and could have major implications for content publishers and instructional providers. This is especially so for those whom argue tests, not standards, drive instructional curriculum content purchased and used by districts. Catherine Gewertz, Education Week's assessment policy guru, reports that high school testing is on the brink of a “profound shift,” as ESSA invites states to choose college entrance exams to measure “achievement” rather than to continue to use Common Core tests such as those designed by the two state-based testing consortia or other aligned assessments. Even though some states allow or require the SAT or ACT for college preparedness and entrance, “few use those tests for required accountability reports.” Thus far, seven states have been approved to take advantage of the new option to do so, noting in some cases that this will reduce testing time and burdens and related costs. Colorado, Connecticut, Maine, and New Hampshire will be allowed to use the SAT, while Arkansas, Wisconsin, and Wyoming can use the ACT as an accountability measurement. According to the Education Week (January 4th), ACT is “talking with ten other states, and College Board is undertaking similar initiatives with other states. The fact that these and other states are following suit and making decisions with

policy implications for the education directions in their state has serious implications for publishers: redirecting a movement away from priorities being placed upon academic standards and their mastery to preparing students for college.

As the article states, “There are no independent research studies analyzing how well the newest versions of the SAT or ACT reflect the depth and breadth of the Common Core standards,” and that testing experts argue, “States are on shaky ground if they use a college entrance exam to measure mastery of their content standards.” On the other hand, using the ACT and SAT allows states to reduce testing time, and in many states costs, and further increases motivation of students as they are “more inclined to try hard on a college entrance exam, while they often don’t see the point of doing their best on state tests with no personal consequences.”

Observers note another ominous implication for many content publishers in that both the SAT and ACT providers now offer test prep online services at little or no cost. Education Week’s Digital Education blog (January 20th) reported that ACT has joined forces with Bench Prep and its “learning engine” to provide the ACT online prep program. The cost of the personalized online global system would be about \$40 for a one-year subscription. Over last year, the College Board has teamed up with the Khan Academy to provide free test prep services. This should concern not only specialized, dedicated test prep firms and other firms with related commercial offerings, but also similar content and services provided by publishers, including some TechMIS subscribers.

Another trend which we touched upon in our last TechMIS Washington Update is the decline in the use of the General Education Development (GED) equivalent exam provided by ACE Testing Company in partnership with Pearson. Use of the new High School Equivalency Test (HiSET), which has replaced the GED in 19 states and the new Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) from McGraw-Hill, which is now used in about ten states has increased dramatically. While the expanded use of these alternative “equivalency” tests can be attributed to the increased cost of the new GED, which began use in 2014; and another important reason contributing to the increased use of GED alternatives has been the high level of rigor and difficulty levels to pass the new GED. As noted in our previous update, decline in the use of the GED has dropped by nearly 50 percent over the last decade; however, in order to meet the new competition, the cost of administering the new GED is reportedly going to be reduced in the immediate future. Difficulty levels will also be reduced, with “grandfathers” being given to those who “barely” missed “passing” scores over the last year (e.g., 20,000 participants thus far who “failed” initially).

Contributing to the turmoil in the state assessment area, Education Week (February 3rd) reported, “Students who took the 2014-15 PARCC exams via computer tended to score lower than those who took exams with paper and pencil – a revelation that prompts questions about the validity of the test results and poses potentially big problems for state and district leaders.” A PARCC official confirmed that the pattern differences between computer-delivered and paper and pencil tests did exist, stating that “There is some evidence, that in part the

score differences we are seeing may be explained by students' familiarity with the computer delivery system." The pattern was most pronounced in English language arts and middle and upper grades math. Education Week also cited similar findings from districts in Illinois and Maryland.

Last year, roughly five million students in ten states took the PARCC exams with 80 percent taking the computer-delivered exam. In addition to a number of states which had dropped all or part of the PARCC exams, key officials in the Smarter Balanced assessment consortia said it is investigating possible similar affects taken by six million students in 18 states.

Hence, in light of the myriad of implications for content publishers of these recent and growing trends, some of which are spurred by the new ESSA legislation, it is too early to tell how publishers will or should respond as specific implications may vary among the individual firms in the publishing sector. One observer recently suggested that during the next two years a "shakedown" will occur as:

- more research on alignments of various tests to meet individual state needs becomes available;
- changes occur in the political climate as a result of more authority being given to the states and to individual governors, state legislatures, state departments of education, and other state entities with decision-making power over assessments; and
- further refinements and developments from the test publishing sector likely occur.

This individual suggested that publishers of

print and digital content minimize major investments in specific areas before the "shakedown transition" period occurs, and that what changes in content, etc. that are made, be provided in digital format and online, which can be more easily modified and customized to individual state situations than hard copy print materials.

ESSA Promotes or Allows Joint Funding Between IDEA and Title I-II for Products and Service Purchases

Even though the IDEA reauthorization is six years overdue and not likely to happen in the next one to two years, new provisions in ESSA can affect special education programs, either directly or indirectly; and in some cases ESSA provides opportunities for joint funding of purchases with Title I and Title II programs. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has prepared a summary of the new provisions from which we selected a limited number which we believe have the most potential opportunities for many TechMIS subscribers.

While a number of the existing IDEA assessment and accountability provisions remain intact, new decision-making affecting special education students or subgroups will be delegated primarily to districts, and in particular affects special education programs in Priority or other "lowest-performing" schools. Most decisions over what interventions to use and how to use them to assist in turning around lowest-performing schools will rest in the hands of district officials, perhaps with some guidelines for selection provided by state-determined models or criteria. Where such state guidance is minimal, districts will be left to determine which interventions are

“evidence-based” and most appropriate for serving students with disabilities.

State and local districts can also use Federal funds to conduct audits of current assessments and to eliminate or modify those they feel do not contribute to student learning. It is unclear how evaluations will be handled for determining whether students should be placed in special education programs and, if so, what levels of response-to-intervention (RTI) approaches should be used for students, who are in districts required to set aside 15 percent for Coordinated Early Intervening Services. Or, in determining what type of handicapping condition or impairment a specific student has. In some states, this might become a major concern as “under”/“over” representation of minorities in special education becomes a larger controversial civil rights issue!! (See August 2015 TechMIS Washington Update)

As CEC’s summary states, the maintenance of effort and supplement-not-supplant (SNS) provisions are maintained, but with “additional flexibility for states and local districts.” States will likely have a major role in defining and determining maintenance of effort and what flexibilities are allowed for districts; the “flexibility” in supplement-not-supplant provisions will depend upon the results of the on-going ESSA “negotiated rulemaking” process which will define “allowable use of funds” as well as “safeguards” for poor and minority students and those students with disabilities.

What levels of RTI approaches can be used and what funds can be used to pay for them (Title I and/or IDEA) in Title I schoolwide programs remains a question which states

will primarily be responsible for determining at a general level (i.e., whether the state “requires or “permits” RTI). Under ESSA, the prospects for significant increases in flexibility are very high, and provide opportunities for many TechMIS subscribers. We will follow the developments in our subsequent updates on the regulatory process and how it affects IDEA special education programs at the district level.

The provision requiring “highly-qualified teachers” (HQT), which was most controversial in special education programs during the last decade, has been eliminated. More flexibility is provided to transfer funds out of Title II for professional development to a variety of areas including special education; however, it is likely that USED will apply to IDEA the ESSA definition of “evidence-based” professional development and its provisions to not allow Federal funds to be used for certain types of professional development (e.g., non-sustained, one-day workshops) which could affect special education programs.

A provision in ESSA would allow competitive funding for a public agency entity to “pay for success” in reducing or avoiding a financial and/or social cost through a preventative measure. Under a performance-based contract or other types of contract agreement with performance-based outcomes specified, if the outcomes result in a direct cost savings in the future, Federal funds could be used to pay for that service. A current K-12 example of this is a “pay for success” project in Utah where additional services are provided to prevent students from having to be placed in special education programs, which is much more costly than regular education placement;

therefore, cost savings over the long run for the district (i.e., Granite District) could occur. The generalizability of such an effort are not clear since the Granite example is a “unique situation being funded by a Wall Street company financing the project; its employees make up a relatively large portion of the Granite city population,” according to one reliable source. However, it is likely that cost savings by reducing the number of students having to be placed in special education programs is likely to be one of the high potential areas of cost saving in any such “pay for success” effort in many districts nationally.

And last, as the CEC summary states, the new ESSA has provisions, which recognize “school-based mental health services as an evidence-based whole school improvement and targeted intervention strategy.” In addition, ESSA requires at least one indicator other than math and reading/language arts achievement scores be used to measure student accountability and success, including such efforts to provide school mental health services, efforts to improve school climate and school safety, and activities to improve collaboration between school, family, and the community. Similarly, opportunities for mental health interventions could also exist in the new Title IV Consolidated Grant program if adequate funds are appropriated, even though the \$1.6 billion authorization level will not be met, perhaps never (see January 23, 2016 Washington Update).

New Obama Priorities for English Language Learner (ELLs) Will Be Reflected in Next Round of Competitive Grants of Title III National Professional Development Competition

Under the new ESSA, USED will have less control over the Title III program, which is being integrated into Title I, with the USED authority for prescribing interventions for struggling ELL students being delegated to states and districts. However, over the last five years the Obama Administration has increasingly used “competitive grants” to implement its priorities when Congress would not fund them; the Administration continues to hold onto this prerogative in the next round of competitive grants for the National Professional Development \$24 million grant competition to improve classroom instruction for ELLs. Announced in the Federal Register, this grant competition is expected to award about 50 grants of \$400-\$500,000 annually, which will have to be awarded prior to October 1, 2016, after which time the new provisions in ESSA “kick in.”

As *Ed Central* (December 18th) notes, grants are awarded based upon general selection criteria “but they also award a smaller number of additional ‘bonus points’ tied to a specific set of “competitive priorities” set by the Department of Education each cycle. This gives the Department some discretion to “steer applicants’ approaches for supporting ELLs.” The article compares the “competitive priorities” set in 2011 to those included in the upcoming round of grants. In 2011, “competitive priorities” included projects designed for database decision-making, projects promoting STEM products, projects improving high school achievement

and graduation rates, while improving teacher preparation in these areas.

The priorities in this 2016 cycle are: “Moderate” evidence of effectiveness, meaning that among other criteria, there must be at least one study on the effectiveness of a proposed idea or approach that meet expectations of rigorous research evidence-based standards; another priority would fund PD projects which improve parent, family, and community engagement, which according to the article, “builds on the growing recognition that families are a critical lever in supporting ELLs’ education success.” An “invitational priority” would encourage the use of “dual language approaches” to develop students’ literacy skills. The other “invitational priority” would support projects focusing on the early learning workforce serving ELLs birth through third grade in which pre-service professional development attempts to equip educators with “the foundational knowledge of developmental learning and language acquisition skills.”

As the *Ed Central* article notes, the new priorities indicate the “direction” USED is moving to support ELL “and signals [an ELL policy] shift in focus away from STEM and high school to family engagement bilingualism and early learning.”

Trickle-Down Happens in Kindergarten, Too, Which Has Direct Implications for ECH Publishers

In a recently published paper, “Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?” researchers at the University of Virginia investigated the changing beliefs over the past decade of Kindergarten teachers toward

school readiness, academic and non-academic content, and several other dimensions. Kindergarten classrooms between 1998 and 2010 were compared using two large nationally-representative datasets. The findings show substantial changes in each of the five dimensions considered: kindergarten teachers’ beliefs about school readiness, time spent on academic and non-academic content, classroom organization, pedagogical approach, and use of standardized assessments. The authors report, “Kindergarten teachers in the later period held far higher academic expectations for children both prior to kindergarten entry and during the kindergarten year. The teachers devote more time to advanced literacy and math content, teacher-directed instruction and assessment, and substantially less time to art, music, science and child-selected activities. Changes were most pronounced for schools serving high proportions of low-income and non-white children.”

Below are highlights of the comparisons of the 1998 and the 2010 datasets across four dimensions:

Teacher Beliefs: In 1998, 31 percent of teachers believed children should learn to read in Kindergarten while in 2010, 80 percent of teachers believed children should learn to read in Kindergarten. Twenty-nine percent of 1998 teachers believed that parents should make sure their children know the alphabet before beginning Kindergarten, while in 2010 this percent more than doubled to 62 percent.

Curriculum Focus: There’s been a slight drop in weekly art instruction from 95% in 1998 to in 2010 87%. More than half (58%) of the classrooms had dance or creative

movement weekly in 1998 and there was a slight drop 12 years later to 42% for these movement experiences to be offered weekly in Kindergarten. What teachers consider appropriate curricular experiences for Kindergarteners in 1998 is evident in the finding that 18 percent of teachers never engaged in theater experiences with children, while in 2010, 62% of Kindergarten teachers reported that they never did theater activities with children.

Classroom Organization: In 1998 a great majority of Kindergarten classrooms included an art area (92%); however, this percent dropped to 71% in 2010. Declines in the availability of classroom dramatic play areas dropped from 87% in 1998 to 58% in 2010. In 1998 almost half of the Kindergarten classrooms included sand or water tables, but more recently the percent of this “nonacademic” resource for play and exploration is 24%.

Instructional Approaches: Only 20 percent of the 1998 teachers said they used math worksheets daily, while this almost doubled for the 2010 teachers with 35 percent admitting to daily use of math worksheets. Use of reading workbooks or worksheets was higher than math for both groups of teachers, although again, fewer of the 1998 teachers used worksheets when compared to the 2010 teachers (28% compared with 45%).

Art, music and play are no longer the centerpiece of most young children’s school readiness experiences. Now, teachers expect children know more when they arrive at the classroom doorstep, and leave with reading and math skills that come from much of the year spent in instruction devoted to these subjects.

Education Week (February 9th) aptly summarizes the pushdown of first grade curriculum to Kindergarten in its simple headline, “Kindergarten Today: Less Play, More Academics”.

TechMIS clients with instructional products that promote reading and math are well-positioned to market successfully to the 80 percent of Kindergarten teachers who believe that 5-year-olds should learn to read before they leave kindergarten. Those who can articulate the benefits of engaging in art and music and can demonstrate that these experiences for Kindergarteners lead to enhanced academic progress can also respond to opportunities for sales in this environment.

For more information, go to:

http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/20_Bassok_Is_Kindergarten_The_New_First_Grade.pdf

ESSA Will Impact Current Teacher Quality Policies in Several Ways

One of the most far-reaching impacts of ESSA relates to teacher evaluation by not requiring student test scores be used in teacher performance evaluations. Under the leadership of Secretary Arne Duncan, this was one of the most contentious aspects of NCLB flexibility waiver negotiation with States. It appears to be “off the table” under ESSA. Perhaps this shift away from using student outcomes coincides with the new mandated reduction in the number of hours students spend in testing and assessment situations.

In her recent *Ed Central* blog (January 14, 2016), Kaylan Connally shared her analysis

of the future role of teacher evaluation under the Every Student Succeeds Act from the perspective of States' teacher quality efforts. Connally maintains, "it's imperative that states continue investing federal funds in developing and refining evaluation systems to offer valid, reliable, and meaningful information to teachers and school systems." Finding new methodologies and identifying new processes will be a challenge. With this new flexibility regarding teacher evaluation systems, States may be considering adjustments to their education laws and regulations that were enacted previously, due to meeting waiver requirements (see current TechMIS Washington Update for related examples).

Connally identifies some "big changes" in teacher preparation. For example, with "ESSA Title II formula funds states can expand alternative routes to teacher preparation such as teacher residency programs and create new "[teacher preparation academies](#)." For the latter, states can use up to two percent of their funds to devise new programs that operate outside state regulations and colleges of education. These academies would receive state authorization "so long as their program candidates receive 'significant clinical training' under an effective teacher provision and demonstrate their effectiveness prior to graduating, including their ability to raise student achievement." Establishing academies and alternative pathways to teacher preparation could hold potential for TechMIS clients who offer professional development services that are standalone and/or training packages integrated with their products, as these could contribute to the requirements for individual staff for continual professional development. Further, professional development products

and services that strengthen efforts to support mentoring and coaching, and systematic ways to capture data on the more subjective social-emotional/classroom climate of pre-K-12 teacher training are now relevant can be supported through these Title II formula funds.

ESSA replaces the requirement that teachers be "highly qualified." However, states would still need to report on the number and percentage of students who are taught by inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers. Connally summarizes, "Under ESSA, states can also use Title II formula funds to ensure equitable access to 'effective' teaching for low-income and minority students, and must provide a description of how they have used funds toward that end . . . replacing 'highly qualified' with 'effective' encourages states to devise new programs and policies to focus on teachers' *potential or demonstrable effectiveness in the classroom*." Given this change, states may begin to move away from input measures like teacher qualifications toward output measures like evaluation data. Firms with data tracking and other technology administrative systems have opportunities in this emerging area as States work to establish efforts to improve teacher preparation and equity.

Read the full article:
edcentr.al/essa_teacherquality

Early Education and Child Care Made Gains in Many States, But in Others Lost Ground

National Women's Law Center reviewed the 2015 actions by states regarding child care and early education. While many states took

steps to improve access as well as quality of the centers, overall results are a mix of positive and negative with 24 states passing significant child care bills in 2015, with others losing ground.

The non-partisan support for funding for early education and care has improved access to center-based care as well as the quality of those centers. As EdCentral's blog summarizes, "Support for preschool transcends partisan labels, with 22 states with Republican governors and 10 states with Democratic governors (plus the District of Columbia) increasing funding for pre-k programs in 2015-16. Five states still do not invest state funds into preschool programs – Idaho, Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota and Wyoming."

According to the Education Commission of the States in their *50 State Review*, "the total state funding for preschool programs increased by \$767 million to a total of nearly \$7 billion. This is a 12 percent increase over the 2014- 15 spending levels. The trend of increasing funding of pre-k programs in the states is echoed in national priorities as seen in the recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The ESSA authorizes funding for early childhood education in three areas – Title I funding, Title II funding and Preschool Development Grants." (See Special Report.)

Below are noteworthy highlights from the states with the most positive action in the area of expanding access to Early Education and Care.

- Minnesota upped its budget by nearly \$28 million across its three state funded pre-K programs increasing access to high quality early childhood programs for 3- and 4-year-old children with the

highest needs.

- New York increased its total early education appropriation by \$340 million, which was a 91 percent increase over 2014-15, making it one of the top states for both per capita funding and the total amount of state dollars going to preschool programs.
- North Dakota for the first time invested state funds into pre-k with \$3 million targeted to enroll its most needy 4-year-olds.
- Texas targeted its four programs to high quality pre-K increasing its combined spending by 12 percent, raising the total overall expenditures by more than \$100 million.
- Utah has appropriated \$5.8 million for UPSTART, which provides readiness software for preschoolers online; and this program is offered in general to families for \$750 once appropriated funds targeted for those children most in need are expended.

In summary, for the 45 states and the District of Columbia funding pre-k programs:

- 32 states and the District of Columbia increased their total investment in pre-k.
- Nine states decreased funding.
- Three states stayed constant.
- Five states do not invest state funding into pre-k programs.

Find additional details and the full report: <http://www.ecs.org/state-pre-k-funding-for-2015-16-fiscal-year/>

Miscellaneous (a)

Under the new ESSA, the formula for allocating the \$2.3 billion Teacher Quality grants to states (i.e., Title II) would allocate relatively more money than in the past to states with relatively higher poverty counts versus population. Since 2001, the weighting given to population resulted in relatively more funding being allocated to states on that basis. Over time, state allocations will be based upon the newer formula, providing greater weight to states with higher poverty counts. As Stephen Sawchuk noted in *Education Week's Teacher Beat* (December 10th), "Over time, though, there's a definite movement of funding away from Rust Belt states to southern states." Based upon a report recently released by the Congressional Research Service, which conducts studies for Congress that changes in Federal funding formula has for major programs, the states whose annual allocations would decrease by \$10 million or more are: Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico; while states whose annual allocations would increase by \$10 million or more include: California, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.

It is interesting to note that proposals to change funding formula for some other major programs such as Title I were also proposed, but not included in the reauthorization, and for Title II Teacher Quality, the formula change was one of the "lesser noticed changes" in the \$2.3 billion program, according to Sawchuk.

Miscellaneous (b)

Education Week's Straight Talk blog (January 19th) reported an analysis by the influential American Enterprise Institute (AEI) that identified the decline in the number of public high schools offering advanced placement (AP) courses between 2008 and 2012; and AEI recommends that states offer AP coursework for students online. The AEI article found that the declines over that four-year time span occurred primarily in small, rural, and high-poverty schools which were the same types of schools that experienced the greatest increases in AP offerings leading up to 2008. Analyses imply that the underlying cause was related to the "great economic depression," and a policy which would pressure small, rural, high-poverty schools to expand district courses for AP would be counterproductive. Therefore, as a result, the AEI recommends that states offer online AP coursework for students in these schools.

Miscellaneous (c)

The December *School Marketing Newsletter*, published by Bob Stimola, reports that anxiety over technology is growing. In a survey of more than 1,000 classroom leaders and administrators, entitled *The Houghton-Mifflin Confidence Report*, other interesting results reported in the Newsletter included:

- Educators are optimistic about using new technology tools to perform differentiated instruction and meet new standards, but on the other hand, they are frustrated in "meeting the challenges of new academic standards," with limited financial support for professional development and new teaching tools.

- While 41 percent reported the use of laptops/desktops for classroom work “daily or often,” only 15 percent engage with students online for learning on a “daily/often” basis.

More than half of teachers were more negative about the teaching profession than they were five years ago. About four-fifths of respondents of the survey were teachers and the rest administrators.

The Newsletter also reported results of a survey conducted by Funds for Learning, under the new E-Rate Modernization Initiative. Two-thirds of applicants described Wi-Fi as an absolute requirement, but most Wi-Fi networks are at least three years old, according to the Newsletter. The applicants reported that the application process took longer and was more complex than in previous years and that there was confusion about these changes themselves and their impact.

One major implication of the above reported findings is with the increased confusion and complexity under the first year of E-Rate applications. As we have predicted, one can expect an increase in the number of applications, which are denied or initially turned down. Then after appeals are found to be “meritorious,” one can expect an increase in the number of E-Rate refunds provided back to the districts, which can be used to purchase non-eligible E-Rate products and services, such as professional development and instructional software increase. Our next TechMIS report will include several hundred districts receiving “refunds,” as we continue to follow developments in this area.

Miscellaneous (d)

President Obama has announced his Computer Science for All initiative, proposing \$4 billion over three years in the FY 2017 budget for states, and \$100 million to districts over a five-year period. The proposal is largely symbolic, but the budget request indicates the continuing Obama “verbal” support for STEM and directly-related activities. Most observers believe that Congress is not likely to provide any new money or even vote on the measure before Obama leaves office. As an Education Week article notes, “Funding from other programs which have flexibilities, such as the National Science Foundation and AmeriCorps, will be providing some of its existing funding to the effort; however, most observers feel that if anything along the lines of support such as allowing computer science to count as a math or science credit, or even language credit toward high school, or even state funding, will occur at the state or local level. On one hand, the new ESSA emphasis on college- and particularly career-readiness as a prerequisite for high school graduation will stimulate and support such activities at the state and local level. On the other hand, the presidential “bully pulpit” has been successful in garnering the use of existing Federal funds and redirecting them to STEM and STEM-related activities, particularly in after school programs over the last five years as we have reported.

Miscellaneous (e)

The Washington Post reports that the District of Columbia State Board of Education has approved a resolution that would allow students who pass the GED

exam to receive a high school diploma. The Board justified the action to draft regulations to implement the decision because the new GED test rewritten in 2014 “is norm so that those who pass must out-perform about 40 percent of students who graduate from high school.” If the Board approves the regulations, “...that move could prove to be the wave of the future,” according to Education Week’s High School & Beyond blog (November 20th). If information gathered by the GED Testing Service proves true, D.C. will be the first to base its decision on the rigor of the new GED so that a student passing the GED could receive a high school diploma.

Currently, 11 states provide some kind of high school diploma for GED passage or a certificate of high school equivalency (Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Oklahoma). GED Testing Service officials, who monitor what states decide about diplomas, said they have “heard that other states may do the same in the near future as the District of Columbia just did.” According to the GED Testing Service, it continues research tracking GED completers and comparing their outcomes with those of high school graduates and with those of students who dropped out, according to the blog. And, preliminary data suggests a “higher percentage” of GED completers are entering career and college training.

Over the last few years, the number of students and others taking the GED test have been between 750,000 and one million, many taking the new GED test more than once; this increases the use of GED test prep and other remedial developmental type courses, activities, materials, etc. being used.

With the increase in dual enrollments continuing into the near future, and additional related flexibilities being provided by states, the D.C. approval of GED passage being the same as getting a high school diploma could increase the number of students and others seeking a high school diploma rather dramatically. Just as the increased adoptions by four-fifths of the states of career and college readiness standards should increase the demand for remediation and developmental materials, programs, etc. for at-risk students at the high school and college freshman levels, providing high school GED “diploma equivalents” to higher performing and motivated students and others who pass the GED cutting short high school attendance could increase the demand for specific materials, provided through online personalized, on-demand instruction.

Miscellaneous (f)

A recent survey identified several strategies which were found to be effective for improving mathematics instruction in states implementing Common Core standards and using consortia assessments. A survey of randomly selected 1,500 fourth and fifth-grade teachers and 140 principals in Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Nevada found that three quarters of teachers said they are changing instruction around Common Core. As reported in Education Week’s Inside School Research blog, as reported by the math teachers, three school instructional improvement strategies showed correlation with student achievement:

- “having more observations with explicit feedback;
- including standards aligned student outcomes in teacher evaluations;

- having more days of professional development.”

The blog also reports that populations which provided feedback by Department chairs showed more significant effects than did observations of math teachers conducted by principals. No effective strategies for English teachers were found in the analysis.

Miscellaneous (g)

A recent study which examined test scores of ELLs identified traits of districts that are producing stronger academic outcomes for ELL students. In a recent webinar hosted by the USED Institute of Education Sciences Gary Cook and Narek Sakhayan, researchers from the WIDA consortium at the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research, shared their findings from their study of assessment scores of 1.5 million ELLs in 35 states which were summarized in an October 15th Ed Central blog. WIDA is developing the ELL “alternative” assessment to Common Core state assessments.

Their aim was twofold: to accurately identify districts evidencing relatively higher (and lower) growth in English language proficiency; and to then uncover underlying traits shared by those districts.

Researchers identified a list of 43 “high-flying districts” in the top 25 percent and 30 “low-cruising districts” falling within the bottom 25 percent. Those top 43 districts high-flying districts reflected patterns linking socioeconomic status to growth outcomes, and produced stronger academic outcomes not only for ELLs, but for *all* their students. Regarding the socio-economic status (SES) of districts the proportion of

students receiving free and reduced lunch in high-performing districts was *three times lower* than that of low-performing districts for ELLs.

The blog states, “The research also illuminated interesting questions around the importance of district size and the number of ELLs in relation to native English-speaking peers. For example, low-performing districts for ELLs were consistently smaller: they had a lower average number of students, teachers, and schools compared to high-flying districts. But, there were no detectable differences between the *ratios* of pupils to teachers. That is, district scale somehow matters and class size may not matter as much.”

It is interesting to note that the study found “a handful of exceptional, high-poverty districts that – against all odds – received the high-flying designation...It is possible for ELLs in the relatively poor districts to demonstrate above average levels of growth for ELLs.” As the blog reports, the research team plans to conduct a follow-up qualitative study of these “against all odds” high-flying districts in an attempt to identify factors contributing to their success, such as “the differences in instructional models teacher pedagogy, teacher characteristics, or other factors.”

One implication for TechMIS subscribers who are attempting to find pilot sites for “alpha” or “beta” testing sites of new products for ELL students is that they should attempt to find districts with traits of “so-called high-flying districts” to increase the probability of success, and at the same time conduct pilots in “low-flying districts” to determine if similar results can be

achieved for comparison purposes, which may be even more of a strong selling point.

Miscellaneous (h)

According to the Associated Press, the Walton Family Foundation has pledged to spend \$1 billion over the next five years on charter school activities, compared to about \$400 million over the last 20 years for charter schools in low-income communities. The Foundation argued that after analyzing its previous work, it was clear that students and their families should have more options such as charter schools and that it should be easier for families to learn about the options. Walton Family Foundation spokesperson Marc Sternberg is quoted, "People in poverty need high-performing schools. Our goal is that all families have better schools to be the rising tide to lift all boats." According to the article, the new money will be spent in locations where the foundation has already provided funding and otherwise has "community ties" to create new schools and develop "pipelines of talent."

Interestingly, Education Week's Charters & Choice blog notes that last fall the Foundation announced new, but much smaller investments in a new area for its education philanthropy: research on measurement of non-cognitive traits such as "grit" and "persistence" in classroom settings. As we noted in our December 4th Special Report, a new ESSA priority in charter schools is to require more cognitive (e.g., math and reading) assessments in charter schools which USED funds while ESSA calls for greater use of non-academic measures in other public school schools. These rather conflicting priorities will be an interesting area for TechMIS clients who

target the charter school niche market to follow.

Miscellaneous (i)

The Washington Post (October 30th) reports that several major retailers and fast food restaurants are partnering with the GED Testing Service to provide free GED prep and testing for employees who lack a high school diploma beginning this year. Employees of Wal-Mart, KFC, Taco Bell, Southeastern Grocers, which operates Bi-Lo, Arby's, and Winn Dixie stores all provide free online study materials, practice tests, and access to advisors to motivate their employees to continue the lengthy GED prep process. For the most part the employer covers the \$300 average cost per GED candidate.

Since the GED test was revamped in 2014 to align with higher academic standards and/or the Common Core, the test is now online, but is also more expensive to take than in the past. Tony Carnevale, Director of the highly-respected Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, felt the partnership would benefit both the employees and firms where retention is a big problem; he is quoted, "By providing benefits and paying attention to training, you can attract the best employees. You are saying, I may not be able to put you in a manager's job, but I will help you move along while you work for me." Among the participating firms, KFC estimates the number of employees lacking a high school diploma or equivalent is about 125,000. Brian Poland, Director of Lifelong Learning & Talent Development at Wal-Mart, said he does not know exactly how many of its 1.3 million employees lack high school

equivalencies, but the number is substantial.

It would appear that the respective companies' foundations are taking the lead roles in providing funds and leadership in the new partnership with the GED Testing Service. And, as the Washington Post notes, the partnership could provide a way to tap into "a potentially large market for adults who lack a high school diploma."

At the national level, Education Week's High School and Beyond blog (January 13th) reports that the high school equivalency assessment market is undergoing profound shifts as more than 19 states are now using the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET)

sold by ETS and Iowa Testing Programs and 12 states are using the Test Assessing Secondary Competition (TASC) marketed by CTB-McGraw Hill. Both are alternatives to the traditional GED test, the use of which has declined by 50 percent over the last decade. Moreover, according to the article, fewer individuals have been passing the GED test with rates dropping from 70 percent to 60 percent last year. Pearson reworked the GED test in 2014, making it more rigorous to reflect Common Core State Standards according to the blog. Pass rates for the HiSET in Wyoming, which the vast majority now take the HiSET was at 89 percent compared to GED pass rates in 2015 at 73 percent.