

Memorandum

To: Governor-Elect John Carney's Transition Team
From: Wilmington Education Improvement Commission
Re: Comments on Governor-Elect Carney's Education Platform
Date: December 16, 2016

The Wilmington Education Improvement Commission (WEIC) met on December 13, 2016 to discuss the Governor-elect's education platform. Building on comments from that meeting and WEIC's earlier discussions, we urge the new administration to take the following steps during its first 100 days in office. Each item is followed by projected cost.

1. Re-establish the Family Services Cabinet Council as described below. The governor should chair this group and charge it to develop a comprehensive, fully integrated statewide service system for low-income children and families and all children at risk, birth through grade 12. That council should be supported by a Special Advisor in the Governor's office whose sole focus is developing this comprehensive continuum of care. (Cost: \$0)
2. Call for legislation to fund programs targeting low-income students, English Language Learners, and K-3 special education, this plan should be phased-in statewide. (Initial investment \$15MM)
3. Seek an adjustment to the ESSA implementation timeline to align with expected changes in a DDOE more dedicated to support than regulation.
4. Establish a Council of Higher Education Presidents responsible for developing a set of K-12 preparatory goals and initiatives. (Cost: \$0)
5. Insist on final action from the General Assembly-- up or down -- on the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission Redistricting plan.

We elaborate on these as well as additional recommendations below.

Action Agenda

WEIC looks forward to working with the Governor-elect and actively supporting the implementation of his platform. Many of the key recommendations in the Commission's Action Agenda are consistent with the Governor-elect's proposals and education priorities. We believe that the improvement of public education statewide and most especially for schools with high concentrations of low-income students, English Language Learners, special education students and other students at risk, requires action steps in three areas. All three areas are consistent with the Governor-elect's platform and frame the Commission's specific comments on the items in the platform.

Funding Student Success

The State provides no direct public education funding for low-income students, English Language Learners and basic special education, K-3. Without such funds, the teachers who work in schools with high concentrations of these students do not have the resources or tools needed for student success. The challenging fiscal environment makes this priority even more important. Without targeted priority, a reduction or flattening in public education funding is likely to weigh most heavily on schools with high concentrations of students in poverty and other students at risk.

Meeting the Needs of Students in Poverty

The needs of students in poverty must be addressed through stronger alignment of needed supports and services starting in early childhood and extending through entry into a career or higher education. The proposed Cabinet-level Council can play a leadership role in the development and integration of a comprehensive plan for the integration of services from all sectors to address the needs of low-income children and families and to support schools with high concentrations of poverty.

The Governance of Public Education

There are 44 units of public education governance in Delaware for a total public school population smaller than single districts in many states, including districts that have much higher overall academic performance. The fragmentation of public education governance is most acute in and around Wilmington where the approximately 11,500 public education students in that City are served by 23 different districts and charters with no requirements for coordination or collaboration. Coherent and responsive governance is essential to improve student outcomes. Promoting coherence and responsiveness in Wilmington and throughout the state should be a key priority of the new Secretary of Education and the Department of Education, central to the agency's playing a more supportive than regulatory role.

Ensure All Children Get to Kindergarten Ready to Learn

The achievement gap between poor and more prosperous children is created even before those children arrive at school. If student learning falls behind in those early years, it is very difficult and sometimes impossible to compensate later. There must be a heightened awareness of the importance of early learning among families statewide. Early childhood education must be affordable to all families.

Early childhood educators need the professional development and tools to support student success.

Improved coordination and execution of professional development for early learning providers should be a focus of the new Cabinet-level Council.

Early learning funding must be sustained to improve access to quality programs. As the federal early learning challenge grant lapses, the funding gap needs to be filled by state funds in order to sustain the recent improvements in the quality of early childhood education programs available to low-income students. Without sustained funding, support for low-income students to retain access to quality improvement programs will be eroded and the state will regress in its ability to provide high-quality care, particularly to the students who need it most.

The transition from early learning to K-12 education needs to be strengthened through statewide partnerships between early childhood providers, public schools and community support organizations. Building partnerships and enhancing services will help create a seamless transition into K-12 to enable teachers to better determine the needs of their students and better evaluate the areas for further improvement in early learning.

The proposed Cabinet-level Council should replace the current Interagency Resource and Management Committee (IRMC) and support the Early Childhood Council (ECC) to continue to drive key early childhood improvements and connect leadership and contributions from all sectors.

The Cabinet-level Council should develop stronger coordination of services for low-income children and families. Children in poverty face particularly harsh circumstances due to the burdens imposed by their environment that extend far beyond the limits of their families' incomes. These burdensome conditions include violence and instability at home and in their neighborhoods. Other factors include institutionalized racism and classism, high unemployment rates, lack of 'livable wage' work, lack of sufficient safe and affordable housing, food insecurity, pervasive stereotypes about children of color who live in poverty, and the underfunding of educational and social supports designed to address trauma exposure. Further, traumas students experience in their daily lives are carried with them to school, and most schools are not equipped to respond to those challenges. The new Cabinet-level Council can be instrumental in developing a comprehensive plan to improve the integrated delivery of services to address the developmental needs of children from birth-5, within K-12, and beyond college and career.

The State needs to adopt an approach that focuses on the developmental needs of children and then align needed supports and services to meet those needs starting in early childhood and extending through entry into a career or higher education. The Cabinet-level Council should evaluate improvements in the full range of services that include in-school services, after- and- out-of-school programs, school partnership programs, and programs to reach and engage families in student learning and connect them to available services and supports from all sectors. Improved alignment will strengthen cost-effectiveness in the overall delivery of educational programs and services.

Existing state programs serving children and families are often largely disconnected and in some cases, duplicating efforts. The new Cabinet-level Council should provide ongoing oversight for the integration of these state services. That Council needs to take responsibility for the development and implementation of a comprehensive plan for state and local services, including partnerships with private and nonprofit institutions, which will create a community of support for low-income children and their families and aid in the integration of services within a developmental framework. In addition, we should utilize other state-level councils, such as the P-20 Council, to support alignment of educational programs from early childhood to higher education and entry to the workforce. Systems and agencies should operate together in order to promote effective and sustainable information and data sharing that promotes effective transitions across the stages of a child's development and across different educational institutions. The UD Partnership for Public Education can support the P-20 Council in carrying out these efforts.

Give Educators the Tools They Need

Research on professional learning, particularly for teachers, indicates that providing time for, and structures that support, collaboration can result in the diffusion of ideas, resources, and practices, and may ultimately impact student learning. While schools currently engage in these practices, there are limited opportunities for schools serving Wilmington students to regularly engage in this type of shared learning and growth. The same can be said for districts and schools statewide, particularly those serving low-income students.

Professional development should become more centralized, content-focused, and personalized to increase effectiveness at the school-level. When professional development is done at the school level, it must be personalized to fit the contexts of the school and the student population it serves. It should also provide opportunities to connect teachers to resources in the community to help support students at risk.

It is crucial to increase collaboration and coordination of learning opportunities across schools and districts that serve similar students. Schools across the state, particularly in Wilmington serve student populations with similar needs. There is a great need to establish opportunities for these schools to collaborate in professional development programs that enable educators across schools to better serve their students.

Professional development topics must be relevant and meaningful to teachers. For example, professional development topics should include: trauma-informed practice, cultural competency, implicit and explicit bias, restorative justice, institutional and structural racism, supporting English Language Learners and families, understanding brain development, among many others. These topics are areas where teachers need the most support and could benefit from targeted development.

Educators are the most important influence on student learning. In order to most effectively serve our students, there must be continued and sustained support for both novice and existing educators.

Support for new teachers must be sustainable and include support from expert and mentor teachers. This can include models such as co-teaching with an expert teacher for a year, mentor programs within schools, extra support within classrooms, and opportunities for collaboration and observations with master teachers. Prior to their first year, future teachers could benefit from residency programs, and placements in high-needs schools statewide to better prepare for the profession.

The development and career path of teachers must be flexible to create pathways to success. Teachers should have opportunities to advance into leadership positions within their school other than typical administrative roles. Teacher development should be personalized and geared toward what best suits each teacher individually.

Refocus DDOE from a Regulatory Agency to a Support Agency

The Commission agrees that the Delaware Department of Education should shift its focus from an entity focused mainly on enforcing compliance to one that supports schools with the sharing of research and active encouragement of best practices. DDOE should act as a thought-partner with schools to help promote collaboration and the replication of best practices so that what works in one school or district can be replicated throughout the state. DDOE should take an active role as the leader of education research and development in the state. If a school or district wants to learn about a particular content area, they should be able to contact DDOE for support.

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DDOE should capitalize on opportunities in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The Delaware Department of Education should take full advantage of the opportunities available in ESSA law when developing the state plan. ESSA includes multiple opportunities for states to provide services that meet the needs of all students, especially low-income, ELLs, and special education students. **The state plan should take advantage of new measures of student growth.** The focus of the state’s accountability system should not just be test scores, but growth and other non-academic measures that impact student success. Additionally, the state plan should be inclusive of all schools, *both* districts and charters. **The state should seek an adjustment to the ESSA implementation timeline to align with the upcoming administration change at DDOE.** Delaware should delay implementation until 2018 and secure a waiver from the federal Department of Education.

DDOE should be a leader in sustaining collaboration and scaling up of best practices statewide. Cooperation, collaboration, and shared learning across the 44 sub-systems in the Delaware public education system are the exception rather than the norm. Efforts to improve student learning seldom follow a unified or coordinated strategy across districts and charters and even when such strategies are proposed, coordinated implementation is rare—and often resisted. Increasingly, public resources are dispersed among competing units at growing public expense.

The Governor-Elect should call all school leaders together to collaborate on best practices. In Delaware’s history, no Governor has called school leaders, inclusive of district superintendents and charter directors, together to discuss education issues and potential opportunities for collaboration. This is not the product of indifference on the part of district leaders or boards, but the product of carrying out their designated and separate responsibilities under the current arrangement of public education. Convening an ongoing conversation among charter, vo-tech, and traditional public school leaders to discuss opportunities for and obstacles to enhancing meaningful collaboration among their schools can have sustainable benefits.

A framework for collaboration among all schools and school leaders including charters, districts, and Vo-tech schools must be improved and sustained. The Commission has actively promoted and supported such collaboration and believes that DDOE can help build this framework in their new supportive role. An example of this is to create opportunities for responding jointly to community needs, such as through shared professional development focused on issues like trauma-informed teaching. This can also include the development of a clear, statewide plan for public schools of all types to operate jointly in the interest of overall student growth. The sum of the public education assets represented by the diversity of Wilmington schools can benefit all students in more ways than at any time in the past or present. The same must be promoted statewide in order to share best practices and discuss what can be done to benefit all students, regardless of zip code. This is essential in order to scale-up school success.

Ensure Students Graduate from High School Career and College Ready

The definition and messaging of college and career readiness should place a more equal balance on career readiness. Currently, the state has focused most of its efforts on establishing a college-going culture; however, it is important to acknowledge that many careers may require some other type of postsecondary credential or training. In essence, the state’s college and career readiness objectives

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must not solely focus on college going. Students should be equipped with the skills needed to thrive if they choose to pursue another pathway than immediately enrolling in school after graduation.

College and career planning opportunities should be integrated earlier into students' academic careers, including middle school and early high school, to help equip students with the skills needed to successfully transition to college and career.

The New Castle County (NCC) Vo-Tech District, traditional district schools, and charter schools should collaborate on expanded vocational education opportunities for all students. Vocational educational opportunities should be inclusive of low-income, at-risk and special education students at all schools.

To promote expanded vo-tech opportunities, the state should establish partnerships with local businesses based on a comprehensive, statewide jobs plan developed jointly by the Department of Labor, the Delaware Economic Development Office, the DDOE and the P-20 education community. The Governor and business community should launch a business sponsorship program focused on Delaware schools with high percentages of low-income students. Programs should look to provide students with work-based learning opportunities like fellowships and internships in order to both expose students to career paths and provide them with a college ready or employable skill set. In preparing students for college and career, partnerships should look to promote the acquisition of soft skills like preparing for interviews and workplace communication skills as well.

Establish a vision for college and career success inclusive of all students. The state's vision for college and career success must actively seek to promote success among all students, especially low-income, English language learners, and special education students. The state's vision for college and career success must also be inclusive and recognize the unique talents and strengths of the state's students.

Students should be provided with support and guidance regardless of their postsecondary pathway, and schools must remain aware of implicit bias and should not limit students based on their status or background. Efforts to promote college and career readiness should not limit students or push students toward a particular path based on their background or socioeconomic status. However, the state should remain aware that not all students have the ability or interest to pursue postsecondary education immediately following graduation; some students may have to delay enrollment due to financial concerns or familial obligations. Further, college and career opportunities should look to capitalize on the strengths of each student. More specifically, career and college opportunities must be inclusive of all students, especially students with severe disabilities. Special education students and individuals with disabilities are key members of the state's workforce, and therefore, their college and career success must be valued and integrated into the state's vision for college and career success