Closing the achievement gap: Four states' efforts

The education achievement gap separating economically disadvantaged students from their more advantaged peers has been the focus of discussion, research and controversy for more than 40 years. Below-par achievement of minority and low-income students remains one of the most concerning problems in education.

A new report from the Education Commission of the States highlights the efforts of four states -- Connecticut, Massachusetts, Washington and Wisconsin -- to reduce their achievement gaps through state-level task forces or commissions and other legislative action. These four states historically boast average or strong academic achievement levels, but all are facing gaps, some of them significant.

"As ECS works with states across the country, we consistently hear concerns about closing persistent achievement gaps. It is a critical issue that warrants extra attention," said Micah Ann Wixom, an ECS policy analyst and author of the report. "This report offers policymakers insight on some of the differing approaches states have taken in an effort to close their achievement gaps."

Some important takeaways from this report:
- Even states with track records of above-average and strong academic achievement -- such as Massachusetts and Connecticut -- still grapple with how to close persistent achievement gaps.
- Although recommendations and goals from state task force or commission reports vary widely, some common themes include:
  - Offering professional development specific to teachers and administrators in low-performing schools and districts.
  - Creating programs to recruit and retain teachers and administrators of color.
  - Assisting English language learners (ELLs) and ELL teachers through special programs and extra teacher training.
  - Creating initiatives to address housing and food insecurity.
  - Expanding early childhood education programs.
  - Exploring alternative disciplinary actions to suspensions or expulsions, as they disproportionately affect students of color.

Check out other ECS resources:
- State funding mechanisms for English language learners (January 2015)
- Third-grade reading policies: Spelling it out -- policies directed at ensuring early reading success (December 2014)
- State Civic Education Policy Framework: A guide for policymakers (November 2014)
- The Progress of Education Reform: Career/Technical Education (April 2014)

In case you missed it:
- Blueprint for college readiness: A 50-state policy analysis and Blueprint 50-state database (October 2014)

ECS launched the Blueprint for College Readiness initiative to provide guidance and support to the growing number of states working to improve student success and transition from high school into
postsecondary. The Blueprint features a menu of 10 critical policies promoting college readiness and success and explores the extent to which states are pursuing each policy.

For questions, contact ECS Director of Communications Amy Skinner at askinner@ecs.org or (303) 299. 3609.

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