Happy Thursday (and a snow day for many schools in Northwest Arkansas)! The OWL is snowed in this week, but look for us to post a new Policy Brief either on Friday of Monday highlighting Arkansas rankings in Education Week's annual Quality Counts report. It has been widely reported recently that overall, Arkansas is earning a grade of B- (as compared to the C earned by the U.S.). Our report breaks down each graded section to provide further detail regarding how our education system measures up to the standards set by Quality Counts.

We would also like to announce a lecture being held at the University of Arkansas this Friday (unless the University is closed) by Virginia Secretary of Education, Gerard Robinson. The lecture is being held this week in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. You can RSVP here. A light lunch will be served.

Newsworthy this week is a report from the Center for American Progress titled Return on Educational Investment: A District-by-District Evaluation of U.S. Educational Productivity - a yearlong effort to study the efficiency of the nation’s public education system - was released this week. The report includes the first-ever attempt to evaluate the productivity of almost every major school district in the country. Some of the findings include:

- Many school districts could boost student achievement without increasing spending if they used their money more productively.
- Low productivity costs the nation’s school system as much as $175 billion a year.
- Without controls on how additional school dollars are spent, more education spending will not automatically improve student outcomes.

We also want to remind you this week of the recent launching of our new OEP Blog!! Our blog is on the web at www.officeforedpolicy.com and we hope you will add us to your web-browser’s bookmarks and/or your RSS Feed. Part of our plan is to incorporate the OWL (OEP Web Links) into the OEP Blog; however, this week we are still releasing this OWL in its familiar format so that none of our readers will be caught off guard.

But please note: we are simultaneously posting a blog version of this same OWL on the OEP Blog so that you can do a comparison of the new version versus the old. It’s a New Year, and we hope to bring many new things to you through the OEP. Please check out the Blog Links at the end of each news section below to compare the old OWL with the new blog version.

With our new Blog format, you will still receive a weekly email from the OEP which will include pertinent education news from the state, region, and nation…it will just come to you in a slightly different format. We are also including a poll on the OEP Blog asking for your input on the new blog format. We want to know if you embrace this change or would rather keep things as they are. We want to make sure that we are getting the news to you in the most digestible format. The OEP Blog will allow us to further separate out relevant information as it pertains to education. For
example, the OWL section of the OEP Blog will still bring you news stories, but we are also including separate areas for Legislative Updates that will impact education in Arkansas, as well as a section (the actual blog itself) that contains our perspective on the news, legislation, and other important topics in the field of education. We will also use this space to report on and discuss newly released OEP Publications.

We are moving to the blog format so that we can provide our readers a simple mechanism for communicating with us through the comment areas featured in each section of the OEP Blog. We would like to hear more from you. We want your perspectives and your input. We think the OEP Blog could serve as a mechanism for generating a larger dialog among educators in our state and with our Office. We hope you enjoy the new OEP Blog!

**News from Around the Natural State**

**Education Leader Kimbrell Takes Notes Abroad**
Arkansas Education Commissioner Tom Kimbrell is blogging from Helsinki this week as he and a small team of other American professionals are checking out the high performing Finnish education system. Kimbrell is traveling at the invitation of ASCD, formerly known as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. A link to the blog can be found at [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org).

**Two Charter Schools, One Atypical, Get OK from State Board of Ed.**
The Arkansas Board of Education on Friday approved two new charter schools - one in Little Rock that will target high school dropouts and another that will convert the entire Cross County High School academic program into a “wall-to-wall project-based learning” system. The two new charter schools that will begin operating next summer are distinctive from other charter and traditional public schools.

Click here to check out these news stories on the new OEP Blog!!

**News from Around the Nation**

**Fresh Effort on ESEA Expected From White House**
A prominent and sustained White House push for renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—which is widely expected to be part of President Barack Obama’s State of the Union address next week—is viewed as crucial to prospects for the 9-year-old law’s reauthorization by a now-divided Congress. The law’s current version, the No Child Left Behind Act, was President George W. Bush’s signature domestic achievement when it was passed in late 2001 with big, bipartisan majorities. Now it is considered outdated by practitioners and policymakers from all parts of the political spectrum.

**Teacher-Led School Innovates With Student Regrouping**
At Palmer Park Preparatory Academy, teachers are gradually assuming administrative duties to become the city’s first teacher-led school. An extended day, part of the district’s reform policy, gives the staff time every afternoon to compare teaching strategies. And finally, a new, pilot schedule for 7th and 8th graders lets teachers regroup the middle school students in different English/language arts and math classes frequently, based on the students’ performance and how quickly they are learning new material. The changes are the K-8 school’s attempt to get concrete about the much-touted but often vague concept of “differentiated instruction” for students, especially for those who have struggled to grasp key concepts and risk falling further behind.

Click here to check out these news stories on the new OEP Blog!!
Don't forget, you can always keep up with more education news on the In the News section of our website.

Site Seeing

As our New Year’s Resolution, the OEP is launching the OEP Blog! The Blog will feature all of our weekly news stories seen here in the OWL as well as Legislative Updates, and a running commentary (the actual Blog itself) from OEP Staff on news stories, legislation, and other pertinent topics in education. We hope you enjoy it!

Mark Your Calendar

January 21 – Senate Education Committee Meeting (contingent upon whether there is legislation to be discussed)
January 25 PRAXIS III™ 8:30 a.m. - 3:30 p.m., Harding University, Liberty Room, Cheri Smith: 501-279-4050

Save the Date!

University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform and Arkansas State University Conference:
Showcasing Effective Instructional Practices in Arkansas
Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, AR
February 24, 2011
Cost is FREE!
CLICK HERE TO REGISTER!!!

Final Thought

“Education is not the answer to the question. Education is the means to the answer to all questions.” - William Allin

Thanks for reading! See you next week!

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If you would like to be added or removed from this list, please send an e-mail to oep@uark.edu.
OWL Blog Format

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Across Arkansas this week, Commissioner of the Arkansas Department of Education, Tom Kimbrell, is in Helsinki, Finland where he and a group of American Professionals are checking out the high performing Finnish education system. Dr. Kimbrell was invited to attend this meeting by ASCD, formerly known as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. You can keep up with Dr. Kimbrell and his fellow educators by following their live blog from Helsinki.

Last week, Dr. Kimbrell and the Arkansas State Board of Education were busy approving two new charter schools at the monthly State Board meeting…meanwhile; the Pulaski County School District has set community meeting to discuss a proposal to close or consolidate some schools in the district.

In national news, all this talk in the news about the waves the U.S. Congress is planning to make must have stirred the White House up. Education Week is reporting that the White House is planning a fresh start on reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (commonly known as No Child Left Behind). Details are supposedly going to be mentioned in the State of the Union Address next week.

Lawmaking at the state-level gets interesting in Florida where a State Legislator introduced a bill that would require elementary school teachers to evaluate parents based on “the quality” if their involvement in their children’s schools.

Northward, in Detroit, at Palmer Park Preparatory Academy, teachers are stepping up and gradually assuming administrative duties and roles to become the city’s first teacher-led school.

Finally, a report from the Center for American Progress titled Return on Educational Investment: A District-by-District Evaluation of U.S. Educational Productivity - a yearlong effort to study the efficiency of the nation’s public education system - was released this week. The report includes the first-ever attempt to evaluate the productivity of almost every major school district in the country. Some of the findings include:

- Many school districts could boost student achievement without increasing spending if they used their money more productively.
- Low productivity costs the nation’s school system as much as $175 billion a year.
- Without controls on how additional school dollars are spent, more education spending will not automatically improve student outcomes.

There are more interesting findings, which you can view by clicking here. Let us know what you think!
Stay tuned for our next update on the State Legislature’s progress on relevant education bills being heard in the current session.