Report on The ECS Denver 2015 Conference – A Newcomers Perspective
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Canny Key Phrases and Wisdom

- Develop Individualized Student Dashboards
- Some reform efforts attempt to focus on where students “live” but not where administrators, faculty or legislators live;
- Too much data is directed toward “admiring the problem” rather than solving it;
- Too many school systems adopt the mantra: “stack em deep, teach em cheap;”
- It is not enough to deal with K-12 within the formal school, need to broaden to deal with health and social context: “womb to work;”
- ECS tries to make people uncomfortable – create an itch, then help to search for the right ways to scratch it;
- One problem: “We are raising the accountability bar faster than we are raising the capacity building bar;”
- STEM and competency based, technology informed education requires: Students be more connected, more contested, more complex, more competitive, and more design thinking contributions;
- Don’t Dictate – Facilitate;
- Don’t Regulate – Delegate;
- Don’t keep time – Provide Time;
- Don’t Bust – Trust.
- 9 Keys to STEM Implementation and entrepreneurship:
  1. Innovation mind set
  2. Sustained leadership
  3. Aligned investments
  4. Next-generation learning
  5. New tools and schools
  6. Smart cities
  7. Talent development
  8. Collective impact
  9. Advocacy and Policy
Background on the Education Commission of the States

Mission
Primarily, The Education Commission of the States (ECS) is an arena and a mechanism for education policy makers and leaders from all the states to meet and share perspectives, policies, and insights. Not driven by federal agendas, ECS is focused on state level public education. ECS was created by states, for states, in 1965. The organization tracks state policy trends, translates academic research, provides unbiased advice and creates opportunities for state leaders to learn from one another. According to their web page, ECS;

- Does not take sides - is not an advocacy organization.
- Is non-partisan. By-laws require that the chair alternates between Democratic and Republican governors every two years.
- Covers the P-20 spectrum - works with policymakers, researchers and practitioners at all levels of education, from pre-K to postsecondary and beyond.
- Crosses silos in governance - the only state-focused national organization to bring together governors, state legislators, K-12 and higher education department chiefs and other education leaders.

State Commission Delegations
Each state or territory is represented by seven Commissioners who are selected through a process specified in their statutes. Commissioners serve on various committees, which guide ECS's policy directions, oversee the budget and investments, and plan our annual meeting. Typically, each state delegation is selected by law, with representatives of state legislatures, the governor, and various governor appointees. Often, there is an effort to include stakeholders, such as someone from the business community, a university.

Hawai‘i’s Denver official delegation included:
- Lyla Berg, Founder of Kids Voting Hawai‘i and former State legislator – not a commissioner, but on the board of directors for the ECS civics initiative;
- Risa Dickson, Vice President of Academic Affairs, University of Hawai‘i;
- Joan Husted, Executive Committee of the Education Institute of Hawai‘i;
- State Senator Michelle Kidani, Chair, Senate Education Committee;
- State Superintendent Kathryn Matayoshi
- J N Musto, Executive Director, UH Professional Assembly;
- Alan Oshima, President and CEO, Hawaiian Electric;
- State Representative Roy Takumi, Chair House Education Committee.
Also in attendance were two spouses, and the Director of the Hawai‘i Educational Policy Center. An informal dinner including the entire Hawai‘i delegation was the first time Hawai‘i attendees had made an effort to meet and share ideas and observations. However, a majority of this group often ate lunches at the same table. This was helpful for developing relationships with key stakeholders, such as the Superintendent and state legislators.

**Funding**

ECS receives a majority of its funding from the states we serve, as well as the District of Columbia and the territories of American Samoa, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. For those who study education, sift through data, and keep up with research, the [ECS web page](http://manoa.Hawai‘i.edu/hepc/) is a useful source of quality information.

ECS often selects special projects and areas of focus based on state interests, such as early education and civic education.

**A Newcomer’s Impressions & Observations**

As a first time ECS convention attendee, and not part of the “official” group of Hawai‘i Commissioners, these represent observations and impressions.

**Personal Takeaway Unofficial Title of the Conference:** Tweaking The System - Mobilizing Technology and - Overcoming Race and Poverty.

**Popular Symbol or Metaphor:** Many speakers utilized the metaphor of the “pipeline”, through which inertly move students or teachers. Using this perspective, students are not differentiated, and the emphasis is on creating a mechanical and reliable structure.

**Demographically:** Attendees were overwhelmingly ethnically Caucasian, with a very small number of minorities. However, this was not true of the presentations and concurrent sessions, which featured a number of well-respected and dynamic Latinos and African Americans. Also, there were many women leaders who took center stage. Native Americans not obviously present.

**Ideologically:** Most presenters appeared to range from moderate to liberal. Republican leaders often made the point of how they bucked their partisan tide to push for more resources for public education. The program did not confront or address issues relating to teacher unions.

**Stakeholder representation:** Mostly western states, rather thin on urban, lots of state legislators, and prominently featured Teachers of the Year from various states. The program did not feature the current or potential role of higher education, or the ability of college admission policies to impact the curricula of traditional public schools.
While charter schools were occasionally used as successful examples of initiatives or reform, the charter movement was not an important part of the Denver agenda. Little overt focus on Native American education issues, which is interesting considering the number of Western states with significant Native American populations.

ECS Operationally: Generally, a number of key governance and issue-driven groups held business meetings that were not open to observation or participation by non members – listed in the program as by invitation only. These groups & meetings included:

- The ECS Commissioners’ Business Session
- 2015 State Teachers of the Year
- National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement Board Meeting
- Legislative Education Staff Network

ECS Efforts to Create Thematic Dialogue: Most mixing and networking appeared to ignore the so-called Round Tables – kiosks where a theme or issue would be discussed. However, these topics not only reflected many concurrent workshops, but also topics generated by state legislative stakeholders:

1. Helping Underserved and Underperforming Students Succeed
2. Quantifying Reading and Mathematical Demands of Career Preparedness
4. From Fad to Outcomes: Policy and result-driven methods to digital learning adoption
5. Integrating STEM-Based Challenges into Curriculum
7. Professional Development: Ensuring a Return on Your Investment
8. Accountability for the Whole Child
9. How the Arts are Leading the Way for Student Success
12. School Finance: Trends and issues

Missing in Action: (Issues I was looking for but did not find.) Private schools and lessons they could offer; collective bargaining issues; charter governance models, funding or facilities inequities; legal innovations and major court decisions; where schools would find the TIME to initiate reforms or project based learning; multidisciplinary learning and assessments; student leadership and governance participation in school decisions; leadership roles for colleges.
Also not on the agenda were mega-trends that transcend education, such as the diminishing role of the Federal government, the growing role of corporations and the “testing industry,” and diminishing participation and engagement of parents, teachers, and young adults in democratic institutions.

**Most Interesting Concurrent Workshops**

1. **Changes in Teacher Preparation: What K-12 reforms mean for future teacher training.**
   This session became a bit of a testy debate between Kate Walsh, of the National Council on Teacher Quality, and Nancy Zimpher, Chancellor, State University of New York. Walsh offered data to challenge the belief of a teacher shortage. The oft-quoted statistic that about 50% of teachers would leave the profession after five years was denied by Walsh, who noted that if you exclude the struggling urban districts, the attrition rate is more like 17%. Data showed that there was actually a huge oversupply, and the issue was more of at what level and what district.

   A second assertion by Walsh was that part of the problem was that it was too easy to get accepted into colleges of education (lower achieving students) and the ease of graduation and receipt of a credential.

   Zimpher sparred with and rejected some of the Walsh data and conclusions. However, a meeting of minds came with the agreement that effective teacher preparation – including the use of technology to analyze great teachers and receive mentoring feedback – were needed. Both accepted that longer pre-teaching practice, and more intense “clinical” and “technical” practices were part of society’s moral obligation to the future students of new teachers.

   Data provided by Walsh appeared to be national averages that mask the wide variation in district and school circumstances. Zimpher pointed out the huge scale of support systems needed in many states, such as New York, and the financial and scheduling challenges implied by a radically upgraded preparation system.

2. **Civic Education: Examining accountability and assessment.** The 2015 legislative session saw a flurry of bills related to assessment, particularly those pushed by the Joe Foss Institute, through its Civic Education Initiative. The Institute urged states to require students pass the U.S. Citizenship Test as a requirement for high school graduation. Representing Joe Foss was its executive director, Sam Stone, who was challenged on many levels by Emma Humphries (U. of Florida), and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Director, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). The session was moderated by Ted McConnell, ED of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools.
Much focus was on Sam Stone, and those who challenged what they saw as a superficial trend in giving yet another high stakes bubble test, and hardly better than the well-known “Jay Walking” segments on the Tonight show which exposed the embarrassing level of civic literacy, even among college graduates. The best data and research was offered by Kawashima-Ginsberg, whose publications are respected throughout the nation. Under pressure, Stone softened the purpose of the test, conceding it was just a first step to move civic education forward.

All panelists did agree that we could and should do better. However, the session was notably short on what to do about it, how to do it, and how to pay for it. The issues were exclusively focused on K-12, where assessments could be “imposed,” and not so much on how colleges might influence improvements through admissions standards and partnerships in service learning and programs for high school students.

The civic education world has not yet progressed as far as the promotion of STEM learning, where there are a plethora of engagements after school, partnerships with industry, summer campus programs, and parallel but outside of formal schooling competitions such as robotics competitions.

Comments and Analysis
Nontraditional subjects outside of the usual high school disciplines (language, history, math and science) have not yet collaborated on strategies to better prepare young adults in areas such as service learning, financial literacy, civic education, multi-disciplinary science that includes engineering, and applied statistics. These tend to exist on a hit or miss basis, dependent on volunteer teacher leadership and time, and not yet able to compete for time during the standard learning day. Civic education and the other competencies listed above, are relegated to the same marginalization as are art, music, and physical education in an education world that places its highest priorities on high stake testing and preparation.

Conclusions and Observations

1. ECS is a much-needed arena where state legislative and executive leaders can focus on the widest range of difficult and emerging education issues. Conferences, with their particular opportunities to develop other-state relationships, trust, networks, and strategies that might work, are worthy of sustained engagement and attendance. As an unofficial, non-Commissioner attendee, it was worth the time and expense to attend.
2. State delegations could enhance the value of these conferences by meeting as a group before and during the conferences. Often individual attendees are the only representatives of their organizations, and without a collective identity and support structure there is less likelihood to utilize or implement takeaways. In large states, delegates might not know each other in their usual professional lives.

3. ECS should consider opening up its pre-convention meetings, as least for others to observe. Many delegates have no sense of ownership to the ECS governance model.

4. Some of the ECS featured speakers have much to say to all policy makers. It is worth making their presentations available at the state level as frameworks for local discussions and workshops.

5. For all its excellent planning and lineup of speakers, plenary sessions and workshops allocated very little time for Q&A. Attendees were relegated to the role of passive students in lectures – inspiring yes, informative yes, but not a departure from safe scripts or well-rehearsed talking points. While it was not the proverbial “death by PowerPoint,” it was pretty much a one-way street. Policy makers have much to share, ideas to float, constructive criticism to offer.