

Education chief looks for more well-rounded learning

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In this Feb. 25, 2016 file photo, then-Acting Education Secretary Dr. John King, Jr. testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington. It's time for a return to a more well-rounded education for schoolchildren, one that spotlights the importance of science, social studies and the arts, now-Education Secretary King says. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh, File)

Education Secretary John B. King Jr. wants to see a return to a more well-rounded education for schoolchildren, one that spotlights the importance of science, social studies, world languages and the arts.

In remarks prepared for delivery Thursday in Las Vegas, King says some schools have focused too intensely on reading and math and testing in those subjects under the 2002 No Child Left Behind law. It was a complaint King heard before coming to Washington, when he was New York's education commissioner and oversaw the state's elementary and secondary schools.

Now, with a new federal education law in place, King said it's time to reset instruction to embrace other subjects that also are critical to learning.

"There is a lot of reason to believe that students are not getting the instruction in science, social studies, the arts, and world languages that they need," King said. "I count myself among those who worry that the balance has shifted too much away from subjects outside of math and English that can be the spark to a child's interest and excitement, are actually essential to success in reading, and are critical to a child's future."

He cites a survey that found elementary school students spending 21 minutes a day or less on social studies, and not much more on science. The department issued guidance to states this week suggesting different ways schools can use federal money to expand learning in science, technology and other subjects.

King's pitch for more well-rounded learning was welcomed by the head of the Council of Chief State School Officers.

"Reading and math are essential, but we recognize other subject areas are critical for the long-term success of all kids," said the council's executive director, Chris Minnich. "That is why in developing college- and career-ready standards like the Common Core State Standards, states have worked to infuse literacy and writing into all subject areas, not just

English Language Arts. This ensures students graduate with a well-rounded education and prepared for college, careers and life."

King was confirmed by the Senate last month, and is overseeing implementation of the bipartisan education law passed by Congress and signed by President Barack Obama in December.

The law revamps the widely criticized No Child Left Behind Act and returns to states more control over schools, including a shift away from tying student performance on statewide reading and math tests to teacher evaluations. Teachers' unions hated that idea, saying the high stakes associated with the tests were creating a culture of over-testing and detracting from the learning environment.

King says the testing became "excessive, redundant and overemphasized" in many parts of the country.

He plans to visit Tulsa, Oklahoma, to talk with officials who have cut the overall time students spend on district-mandated testing by reducing the frequency of some tests and eliminating one test entirely.

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