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Health, Education, and Human Services
Division

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Education and Employment Issue Area Plan

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Foreword

As the investigative arm of Congress and the nation's auditor, the General Accounting Office is charged with following the federal dollar wherever it goes. Reflecting stringent standards of objectivity and independence, GAO's audits, evaluations, and investigations promote a more efficient and cost-effective government; expose waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement in federal programs; provide information to help Congress target budget reductions; improve accountability by assessing financial and information management; and alert Congress to developing trends that may have significant fiscal or budgetary consequences. In fulfilling its responsibilities, GAO performs original research and uses hundreds of databases, including those it creates when information is unavailable elsewhere.

To ensure that GAO's resources are directed toward the most important issues facing Congress, each of GAO's 35 issue areas develops a strategic plan that describes the significance of the issues it addresses, its objectives, and the focus of its work. Each issue area relies heavily on input from congressional committees, agency officials, and subject-matter experts in developing its strategic plan.

Our issue area's work in education focuses on matters relating to children's early development and their preparation for higher education and work. These issues are especially significant as Congress assesses the effectiveness of current federal education programs and reconsiders the extent of federal involvement. We will continue to focus on federal activities supporting state and local governments' efforts to address (1) children's readiness to learn and (2) the adequacy of school resources and instruction. In higher education, our focus is on the federal role in ensuring access to quality education while containing costs for both students and the federal government. In school-to-work transition, our focus is on (1) the skills students need to successfully move from school to work and (2) linking those skills with the skills businesses need in future employees to remain competitive in the world economy. Our emphasis will be on (1) a federal role that is less directive and more guiding and supportive and (2) the multiple federal funding streams supporting state school-to-work initiatives.

Our employment work focuses on the development of a well-trained, competitive workforce and on workplace conditions. Specifically, we examine the federal role in helping (1) workers acquire the skills they need to be fully employed and (2) employers locate qualified workers. Under the workplace quality issue, our work focuses on federal regulation

of the workplace, especially the impact of such regulation on ensuring worker protections without unduly burdening employers and on employer compliance. In the pages that follow, we describe our key planned work on these issues.

Because events may significantly affect the best of plans, our planning process allows for updating the plan and responding quickly to emerging issues. If you have any questions or suggestions about this plan, please call me at (202) 512-7014.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda G. Morra". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "L" and "M".

Linda G. Morra
Director
Education and Employment Issues

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Table I: Key Issues

Issue	Significance
Preparatory education: Is the federal government using its education resources effectively to support and encourage state and local efforts to provide education programs that will enable all youth to obtain skilled jobs in the economy of the 21st century and to be active and informed citizens?	The U.S. Department of Education will spend about \$15 billion this fiscal year to ensure that American children and youth have access to a quality preparatory education and to the services they need to achieve academic excellence. Despite the passage of major education legislation (Improving America's Schools Act, Goals 2000) in the 103rd Congress and a decade of education reform efforts, many schools still need major fixes. Diminishing resources for education and significant consolidation, downsizing, and streamlining at all levels of government require better strategies to ensure that education reform continues. In addition, during this planning period, Congress will be considering legislation that affects special education programs.
Higher education: How can the federal government ensure that eligible students have access to quality higher education while encouraging cost containment and preventing fraud and abuse with respect to federal resources?	The Department of Education is concurrently operating the new direct student loan program and the existing guaranteed loan program. The Department faces the challenge of efficiently and effectively implementing both programs along with other student aid programs. The demand for federal financial aid resources has grown as increased tuition at both public and private schools has placed an increased financial burden on students and their families. Between 1980 and 1990, the cost to attend a public or private school rose by 109 percent and 146 percent, respectively. In addition, during this planning period, Congress will be considering reauthorizing the Higher Education Act.
School-to-work transition: How can the United States do a better job of helping students obtain the skills necessary to successfully move from school into the workplace and become productive citizens?	Because many youths are ill-prepared to enter the workforce, states are changing the ways they prepare students for work and are using a myriad of federal funding sources. Current congressional efforts under way would consolidate many federal education and training programs, including School-to-Work and the Perkins Act, the main federal vocational education program.

Table I: Key Issues

Objectives

Focus of work

—Identify the factors influencing the costs and benefits of efforts to improve instruction and school climate.

—Assess whether schools have the infrastructure and technology to support quality education in the 21st century.

—Identify approaches for reforming education financing.

—Assess the effectiveness of federal efforts to ensure access to quality programs for the disabled.

—Identify ways to consolidate overlapping programs, functions, and units to eliminate duplication and unnecessary costs.

—Identify ways the Department of Education can more effectively and efficiently provide student financial aid to eligible students.

—Assess how Department of Education financial and management information systems can better support student aid programs and minimize potential fraud and abuse.

—Identify ways the Department can improve its implementation of the direct student loan program without detracting from other student aid programs.

—Identify and suggest alternatives to minimize the cost of education to students and the government, while ensuring needy students access to postsecondary education.

—Identify ways to improve schools' preparation of youths for work, including obtaining necessary academic and technical skills and making informed career choices.

- Successful education models that emphasize local control and choice
- Educational achievement and accountability
- Quality of education facilities
- Reforms in education financing
- Adequacy of teacher preparation
- Technology needs of educational institutions
- Services to disabled students
- Consolidation of federal programs serving youths
- Options for redefining the federal role in providing education assistance

- Operation of the new direct student loan program
- Student aid data systems
- Approval of schools for student aid programs
- Efforts to collect student loans
- Federal efforts to target aid to needy students
- Different funding sources for federal student aid programs
- Student loan repayment options' effect on debt burden and defaults
- Student aid application process simplification
- Privatization of Sallie Mae and student access to loans
- Escalating costs of higher education

- Integration of academic and occupational curricula
- Career exploration programs
- Business participation in work-based learning
- Implementation of School-to-Work Opportunities Act
- Portability of skills credentials

Table I: Key Issues

Issue	Significance
Workforce skills and jobs: How can the United States better assist workers in acquiring the skills needed to become productively employed and help employers locate qualified job candidates?	A strong, internationally competitive economy depends, in part, on effectively preparing workers to compete in the workforce and efficiently helping employers locate qualified job candidates. The federal government has invested considerable effort and resources towards this end. However, serious questions have been raised about the efficiency and effectiveness of these efforts.
Workplace quality: What changes in workplace regulatory strategies would reduce employers' compliance burden while improving the level of worker protection?	Technological and organizational change, the globalization of the economy, and reduced federal resources are calling into question the strategies many federal agencies use to regulate the workplace. To maintain the nation's continued world economic leadership, we need to identify strategies that effectively combine basic worker protections with autonomous employee participation and enhanced employer flexibility. Ensuring the rights of workers, while reducing the regulatory burden on employers, is a subject of considerable congressional interest.

Table I: Key Issues

Objectives

Focus of work

—Identify factors that influence the effectiveness of employment training assistance for economically disadvantaged adults.

—Identify best practices for encouraging private sector involvement in providing employment training assistance to specific populations, such as dislocated workers and at-risk youths.

—Use state experiences to identify best practices to create a more cohesive employment training assistance system.

—Assess the federal role in providing employment assistance.

—Identify options for more collaborative, service-oriented regulatory approaches that will bolster worker protections and facilitate better labor-management cooperation.

—Identify overlap in workplace regulations to streamline and improve regulatory development and enforcement.

—Identify options for reforming equal employment opportunity law enforcement that will expedite enforcement and reduce excessive litigation.

- Exemplary projects assisting the disadvantaged
- Use of labor market information data
- Use of technology in providing training
- Private sector involvement in training assistance
- State efforts to consolidate, coordinate, and implement new employment training strategies
- Innovative uses of unemployment insurance funds to support employment training assistance
- Administration of federal employment grants and contracts
- Department of Labor management information system
- Internal controls for federal unemployment benefit payments
- Options for redefining the federal role in employment assistance

- Framework for setting federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards
- Regulatory overlap between federal and state labor standards
- Strategies that enhance voluntary compliance with workplace standards
- Options for reforming current civil rights enforcement efforts

Table II: Planned Major Work

Issue	Planned major job starts
Preparatory education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Identify successful education models emphasizing local control and choice. •Identify data needed to hold programs accountable for educational achievement. •Link school infrastructure data with staff and student achievement data to determine infrastructure needed to support quality education. •Assess approaches for reforming education finance. •Review technology needs of educational institutions. •Assess adequacy of teacher preparation. •Evaluate the impact of state and local academic standards. •Identify ways to consolidate overlapping federal youth programs. •Assess current administration of education grants and contracts.
Higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Evaluate the direct student loan program. •Assess the need for separate student aid data systems. •Assess the Department of Education's ability to collect student loans. •Identify better ways to target aid to needy students. •Assess the future role of campus-based student aid programs. •Review increases in college tuition and identify best practices in cost containment.
School-to-work transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Evaluate the extent and quality of integrated academic and occupational curricula. •Assess the systems in place to determine the impact of school-to-work programs on workforce quality. •Assess the extent, relevance, and value of youths' work-based experiences and identify implementation issues.
Workforce skills and jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Review exemplary projects to identify factors that contribute to their success. •Assess effectiveness of job training programs for disadvantaged youths. •Assess the availability of useful labor market information data. •Review current efforts to involve the private sector in employment training activities. •Identify state initiatives for implementing new employment training strategies. •Review innovative ways states use unemployment insurance funds to support training assistance. •Assess current administration of labor grants and contracts. •Review the internal controls of the unemployment insurance payment system.

(continued)

Table II: Planned Major Work

Issue	Planned major job starts
Workplace quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Analyze procedural framework for setting federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards.•Determine the extent of the regulatory overlap between federal and state labor standards.•Assess innovative workplace practices, such as joint labor-management Occupational Safety and Health Administration committees.•Determine the extent to which employers currently use workplace committees of any type.•Identify effective practices for improving current civil rights enforcement efforts.

Table III: GAO Contacts

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