



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



DEFICIT COMMITTEE'S FAILURE TRIGGERS AUTOMATIC SPENDING CUTS: Education Programs Could Face \$3.5 Billion in Cuts

On November 21, hours before its statutory deadline, the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, aka the “supercommittee,” announced that it could not come to an agreement on a plan to reduce the nation’s deficit. As a result, the clock began ticking on an automatic spending cut that, if enacted, would greatly impact federal spending on education programs.

“After months of hard work and intense deliberations, we have come to the conclusion today that it will not be possible to make any bipartisan agreement available to the public before the committee’s deadline,” read a [statement by U.S. Representative Jeb Hensarling \(R-TX\) and U.S. Senator Patty Murray \(D-WA\)](#). “Despite our inability to bridge the committee’s significant differences, we end this process united in our belief that the nation’s fiscal crisis must be addressed and that we cannot leave it for the next generation to solve.”

Under a deal struck on August 2 to raise the nation’s debt limit, the supercommittee was created and charged with recommending a plan to reduce the nation’s deficit. A provision triggering automatic across-the-board cuts was included in the debt limit deal with hopes that it would compel the supercommittee to reach an agreement. Because of the supercommittee’s failure, these automatic across-the-board cuts totaling \$1.2 trillion, formally called “sequestration,” will go into effect in January 2013. These cuts will impact both military and domestic spending, including spending on education programs.

According to an [analysis by the Congressional Budget Office \(CBO\)](#), spending on nondefense, discretionary spending, including spending on education, is expected to be cut by nearly 8 percent. Based on the \$45.39 billion in discretionary funding the U.S. Department of Education received in [Fiscal Year 2011](#), federal spending on education would be reduced by \$3.54 billion.¹

The Committee for Education Funding (CEF), a coalition of ninety education associations and institutions, [projects](#) that the across-the-board cuts would cut Title I by \$1.1 billion; special education by \$978 million; and career, technical, and adult education by \$136 million.

“Across-the-board cuts to education would have a devastating impact on students, particularly those in disadvantaged schools, and lead to tens of thousands of layoffs among our nation’s teachers and other education workers,” said **Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), chairman of the Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee**, which oversees funding for education programs.

¹ Discretionary funding total excludes funding for Pell grants.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said he was disappointed that the supercommittee failed to reach a final deal, but urged Congress to continue its work to reduce America’s debt in a “thoughtful and deliberate way that protects national priorities like education at such a critical time.”

“Because the supercommittee failed to live up to its responsibility, education programs that affect young Americans across the country now face across-the-board cuts,” Duncan said in a [statement](#). “As a country, we’ve got to start living within our means, just as millions of Americans do each day. It is critical to meet future challenges and provide rising opportunity for future generations.”

The \$1.2 trillion in automatic cuts will be split evenly between cuts to defense spending and domestic programs. Although efforts are already underway to limit the impact of these cuts, especially those directed at defense spending, President Obama said he would veto any bill that attempts to do so.

“I will veto any effort to get rid of those automatic spending cuts to domestic and defense spending,” [Obama said](#). “There will be no easy off ramps on this one. We need to keep the pressure up to compromise—not turn off the pressure. The only way these spending cuts will not take place is if Congress gets back to work and agrees on a balanced plan to reduce the deficit by at least \$1.2 trillion. That’s exactly what they need to do. That’s the job they promised to do. And they’ve still got a year to figure it out.”



FLEX PLAN: Eleven States Submit Requests for Waivers from Key NCLB Provisions

On November 15, the U.S. Department of Education announced that eleven states—Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Tennessee—formally submitted requests for waivers from key provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). These states will be notified by mid-January or earlier as to whether their plans have been accepted. States not applying during this first round can do so in mid-February.

With a rewrite of NCLB still pending in Congress, President Obama outlined a plan on September 23 to provide states with flexibility from specific provisions of the law in exchange for state-led reform efforts to close achievement gaps, evaluate teachers and principals, promote rigorous accountability, and ensure that all students are on track to graduate from high school ready for college and a career.

“We set a high bar and an aggressive deadline, but these states rose to the challenge,” said **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan**. “Clearly, there’s tremendous urgency for reform at the local level because our economy and our future are directly tied to the quality of public education. States and districts want flexibility from NCLB so they can make local decisions in the best interests of children—and they can’t wait any longer.”

If their plans are approved, these eleven states will set performance targets to graduate students from high school ready for college and a career rather than having to meet NCLB’s 2014

deadline of 100 percent of students being proficient in math and reading; designing locally tailored interventions for schools instead of one-size-fits-all remedies prescribed at the federal level; being free to measure school progress using multiple measures rather than just test scores; and having more flexibility in how they spend Title I dollars.

More information on the announcement is available at <http://1.usa.gov/uJxo1D>.



“CHARACTERISTICS OF GED RECIPIENTS IN HIGH SCHOOL: 2002–06”: GED Recipients Do Not Fare as Well as High School Graduates in College, Report Finds

Although the General Educational Development (GED) credential is often considered to be the equivalent of a high school diploma for students who do not graduate from high school, individuals with GEDs do not fare as well as high school graduates in postsecondary education, according to “Characteristics of GED Recipients in High School: 2002–06,” a new issue brief from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

The brief finds that a GED credential can expand opportunities within postsecondary education, but notes that GED recipients do not enroll in postsecondary institutions as frequently as high school graduates do. Specifically, more than 64 percent of students who graduated from high school in 2003 were enrolled in a two- or four-year institution of higher education in that same year, while only 31 percent of GED recipients were enrolled in a postsecondary institution within five years of receiving their GED. Of the GED recipients who did enroll in postsecondary education, a majority enrolled for only one semester.

The brief also finds that GED recipients differed more from graduates than from dropouts in their choice of high school course study. For example, the majority of high school graduates (53 percent) participated in a college preparatory course of study, while 51 percent of GED recipients and 52 percent of dropouts participated in a general education high school program. Interestingly, when asked their opinion on the importance of education, more GED recipients (36.6 percent) than high school dropouts (26.7 percent) said that education was “not important.”

“Overall, GED credential holders differed more from graduates than from dropouts on measures of school participation and academic achievement,” the brief reads. “However, patterns of GPA percentages suggest that GED recipients began high school with characteristics distinct from those of dropouts but became similar to dropouts over time.”

The issue brief uses data from the base-year study and first and second follow-ups of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002. It contains data from a national representative sample of public and private school students who were in tenth grade in the spring of 2002. By 2006, about 4 percent of these 2002 high school tenth graders had obtained a GED, compared to 88 percent who had earned a high school diploma, 5 percent who had dropped out, and 3 percent who did not fall into any of these categories. The brief points out that students who dropped out of school prior to reaching the tenth grade were not captured in the longitudinal study.

As shown in the box to the right, the brief also includes educational outcomes broken down by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, parental education, and several other characteristics. Compared to high school graduates, the brief finds that higher percentages of GED recipients and dropouts were male (48 vs. 59 and 60 percent, respectively), from the lowest quarter based on socioeconomic status (22 vs. 35 and 55 percent, respectively), and from single-parent families (21 vs. 32 and 31 percent, respectively).

The data also includes reasons for why students chose to drop out and pursue a GED. The four most cited school-related reasons for leaving given by GED recipients were that they thought it would be easier to get a GED (48 percent), they did not like school (44 percent), they were getting poor grades or failing school (39 percent), and/or they had missed too many school days (39 percent). Generally, dropouts gave similar responses except that higher percentages of dropouts than GED recipients reported that they could not complete the courses or pass the tests needed to graduate (33 vs. 22 percent).

Although GED recipients do not fare as well as high school graduates, the brief finds that individuals with GEDs fare better than high school dropouts who do not obtain the credential in future earnings, life satisfaction, levels of depression, and substance abuse.

“Characteristics of GED Recipients in High School: 2002–06” is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012025.pdf>.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of spring 2002 10th-graders, by high school completion status and selected characteristics: 2006

Characteristics	Completion status in 2006		
	High school graduates	GED recipients	Dropouts
Sex			
Male	48.5	59.0	59.7
Female	51.5	41.0	40.3
Race/ethnicity ¹			
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.9	2.1	2.51
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.1	2.0	1.9
Black	13.3	15.5	17.8
Hispanic/Latino	14.2	15.5	33.0
More than one race	4.4	7.3	5.2
White	63.1	57.7	39.7
Socioeconomic status ²			
Lowest quarter	22.2	34.7	55.2
Middle two quarters	50.8	51.1	39.7
Highest quarter	27.0	14.2	5.1
Native language			
English	86.8	88.4	70.7
Non-English	13.2	11.6	29.3
Family composition			
Mother and father	60.0	38.8	35.6
Mother or father and nonparent guardian	15.4	20.1	23.0
Single parent	20.8	32.3	31.3
Other	3.8	8.7	10.2
Parental education			
High school or less	25.4	32.3	55.0
Some college	34.3	40.5	27.3
College degree or more	40.3	27.2	17.6

¹ Interpret data with caution. Standard error is larger than one-third of the estimate.
² Asian/Pacific Islander includes Native Hawaiian. Black includes African American, and Hispanic includes Latino. All race categories exclude Hispanic or Latino origin.
³ The composite socioeconomic status score on which the quarters are based derives from five equally weighted, standardized components: father's/guardian's education, mother's/guardian's education, family income, father's/guardian's occupation, and mother's/guardian's occupation.
 NOTE: "GED" stands for General Educational Development exam. Detail may not sum to totals due to rounding.
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002). "Base Year, 2002," "First Follow-up, 2004," and "Second Follow-up, 2006."



ACE AND PEARSON WORKING TO REVAMP GED TEST: New Test Will Be Aligned to Common Core, Serve as Assurance That Test Passers Are College and Career Ready

Earlier this year, the American Council on Education (ACE) and Pearson announced that they were working to develop a new General Educational Development (GED) credential that is aligned with the common core state standards and assures postsecondary institutions and prospective employers alike that adults who have passed the GED test are prepared to compete and succeed in today’s global economy.

In addition to creating the new, more rigorous GED test, ACE and Pearson will also create a national test preparation program featuring an expanded array of innovative and personalized learning resources and a transition network that connects GED test takers to career and postsecondary educational opportunities.

“This bold, far-sighted, and innovative partnership will provide a new, fresh approach toward solving an old and pernicious problem—the incredible waste of human talent represented by the millions of Americans who lack a high school diploma,” said **ACE President Molly Corbett Broad**. “The resources provided through this partnership will dramatically extend access to the GED credential for American adults and ensure the future quality of the GED test. This partnership will also enable ACE to focus our efforts on learning pathways and policies that support adult learners.”

According to a recent [Education Week article](#), the idea behind revamping the GED test was to reposition the GED as a “step in a journey toward postsecondary training, rather than as an end in itself.” The article notes that the new exam, which is due out in 2014, will have two passing points: the traditional one connoting high school equivalency and an additional, higher one signaling college and career readiness.

“The message is that you’re not here just to get a high school equivalency and walk out. You’re here to get prepared for careers and educational opportunities that are going to demand that you have even more skill,” **Nicole M. Chestang, executive vice president of the GED Testing Service**, told *Education Week*. “What we’ve all learned is that completing only high school—whether through a diploma or a GED—isn’t enough to prepare you. You need to use that credential to open doors to more training or education.”

According to ACE, the GED test is used by all fifty states and the District of Columbia, as well as the U.S. military and federal correctional institutions, for the purpose of awarding a high school graduation equivalency credential. Each year, nearly 800,000 GED tests are taken; in 2009, more than 470,000 individuals were awarded their high school credential.

Read the ACE press release at <http://bit.ly/stGihhr>.



PATHWAY TO RECOVERY: New Report Spotlights Successful Dropout Recovery Programs, Calls for Greater Focus on Out-of-School Youths

In the midst of harsh economic and demographic realities, focusing attention on low-income students and students of color is essential to the nation’s economic well-being and the health of its communities, according to a new report from Jobs for the Future (JFF). The report, *Pathway to Recovery: Implementing a Back on Track Through College Model*, spotlights innovative programs showing how “dropout recovery can be part of the national recovery” and argues that the time is “ripe” to examine these promising practices and to design public and private investment strategies that will allow this work to grow and flourish.

“Our country is unlikely to resolve its skill gap or rebuild its communities without addressing the large and growing population of low-income, underrepresented, and too often out-of-school young people,” the report notes. “The number of low-income families is on the rise, and the bursting of the housing bubble has exponentially accelerated wealth inequality. The latter has disproportionately affected the financial well-being of racial and ethnic minority communities and households, already overrepresented among the low-income population.”

The report finds that the percentage of students who express an interest in going to college has grown tremendously. In fact, the percentage of tenth graders who indicated they wanted to obtain a college degree doubled, rising from 40 percent to 80 percent between 1980 and 2002. It argues that the nation must help young people “realize their educational aspirations” if it is to regain its economic prowess and close a skills gap that is significant and growing. It notes that nearly half of all job openings over the next decade are projected to require some postsecondary education and training.

According to the report, 60 percent of young people who drop out of high school eventually earn some form of high school diploma or certificate, with most doing so by completing a General Educational Development (GED) program. After ten years however, less than one in ten has earned a postsecondary credential.

The report highlights the “Postsecondary Success Initiative,” which was launched in 2008 as a collaboration of JFF, YouthBuild USA, and the National Youth Employment Coalition. According to the report, the first set of young people to go through the initiative are graduating from high school, enrolling in postsecondary education, and persisting in the first year at two to three times the rate of their peers.

For example, 71 percent of all students entering YouthBuild USA’s first cohort of Postsecondary Success Initiative sites earned a high school diploma or GED even though more than 90 percent were former high school dropouts. Of those who earned a diploma or GED, 51 percent enrolled in postsecondary education and 59 percent persisted through the first year.

The report attributes the program’s success to partnerships among community-based organizations and postsecondary institutions that work together to enrich academic offerings, create bridges to postsecondary education, and build first-year supports to ensure that young people get the “academic momentum” they need to attain a postsecondary credential.

In Oregon, Portland YouthBuilders and Portland Community College (PCC) have identified college-ready standards in mathematics, reading, and writing, and then modified program courses to embed these standards. According to the report, Portland YouthBuilders faculty members use extended instructional periods and interdisciplinary units of instruction to introduce students to literacy analysis and research skills that are essential to success in college. In math, these faculty members are working with PCC’s faculty members to align the curriculum to college expectations. The report also includes case studies of successful programs in New York City, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Texas.

Based on the Postsecondary Success Initiative, JFF created a “Back on Track Through College” model for use by national networks, school districts, and postsecondary institutions to create aligned pathways through the first year of college for young people who have fallen off track from graduation or have dropped out. Thus far, there are twenty-nine participating sites and two dozen affiliated college partners across fifteen states. The report argues that spreading the Back on Track Through College model to more sites throughout the country would help thousands of young people while also shoring up the education pipeline and improving the national economy. To this end, it offers five recommendations for how federal policymakers can broaden the reach of Back on Track Through College pathways:

- Invest in what works and spur innovation around successful models.
- Simplify eligibility, reporting, and blending of funds.
- Promote and codify improvements to education accountability systems.
- Place a high priority on encouraging state and local partnerships.
- Use the bully pulpit to highlight programs, activities, and partnerships that show promising results in helping disconnected youth succeed in postsecondary education.

Pathway to Recovery is available at <http://bit.ly/vWUOHt>.

MOBILITY MAKERS: Increasing Community College Graduation Rate Would Boost Economy, Report Finds

Increasing graduation rates at New York City’s six community colleges by just 10 percentage points for the class that entered in 2009 would provide a \$71 million one-year boost to the city and state, according to a new report from the Center for an Urban Future, a New York City–based think tank.

“Community colleges have long been the overlooked stepchildren of the educational system,” the report notes. “But because of profound structural changes in the U.S. economy over the past several years, community colleges have become increasingly critical to the nation’s economic competitiveness and the key platform for moving low-income people into the middle class.”

The report finds that none of the five most populous cities in the United States has a four-year graduation rate higher than 20 percent among their community colleges. Los Angeles (20 percent) has the highest graduation rate, followed by New York City (19 percent), Philadelphia (14 percent), Houston (14 percent), and Chicago (10 percent).

Of the 10,185 students who started at a City University of New York (CUNY) community college in 2004, a “staggering” 63 percent dropped out within six years, the report finds. Of those who remained, 20 percent earned a CUNY associate’s degree, 8 percent earned a bachelor’s degree, and 9 percent were still enrolled. The report estimates that each community college dropout has a combined public cost of roughly \$17,783 in wasted federal, state, and local aid.

“Low graduation rates are a chronic problem around the country,” the report notes. “They cannot be separated from other dilemmas our nation faces: low high school graduation rates, weak college preparation among those who do obtain their high school diplomas, economic dislocations that drive many adults back to school for retraining, and state and local budgets that lag far behind the fiscal needs of the institutions on the frontlines of postsecondary learning.”

The report notes that 80 percent of CUNY community college students must take at least one remedial class; 30 percent work more than twenty hours per week at a job. It offers several recommendations for improving graduation rates among community college students, including developing career pathways for students; identifying gaps in college readiness and transitions; documenting employment outcomes; and providing greater funding, among others.

Mobility Makers is available at http://www.nycfuture.org/images_pdfs/pdfs/MobilityMakers.pdf.

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events in Washington, DC and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor, and Kate Bradley, copyeditor.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance, visit <http://www.all4ed.org>.