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Public Education Policy And Progress



STATE OF ESEA REAUTHORIZATION: President Obama, Secretary Duncan, and Key Lawmakers from Both Parties Appear Confident of ESEA Reauthorization in 2011

During his [State of the Union address](#) on January 25, President Obama outlined his plan for how the United States can “win the future” by out-innovating, out-educating, and out-building the rest of the world. Part of his plan included a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

“If we want to win the future—if we want innovation to produce jobs in America and not overseas—then we also have to win the race to educate our kids,” Obama said. “Over the next ten years, nearly half of all new jobs will require education that goes beyond a high school education. And yet, as many as a quarter of our students aren’t even finishing high school. The quality of our math and science education lags behind many other nations. America has fallen to ninth in the proportion of young people with a college degree. And so the question is whether all of us—as citizens, and as parents—are willing to do what’s necessary to give every child a chance to succeed.”

Obama praised the Race to the Top competition, calling it the “most meaningful reform of public schools in a generation.” He credited it for encouraging over forty states to raise their standards for teaching and learning through the state-led Common Core State Standards Initiative and said it should serve as a model for making ESEA “more flexible” and “focused on what’s best for our kids.”

In a [statement](#) in reaction to the State of the Union, **House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN)** said the president’s “vocal support will only add to the efforts already underway in Congress to pass meaningful education reform.” However, Kline also expressed concern with the president’s request for additional money for Race to the Top.

“Congress should not be cutting blank checks to the administration, especially when our national debt exceeds \$14 trillion,” Kline said. “This request is especially offensive in light of the federal government’s failure to keep its promise to fund special education. No one can justify funding new federal programs at a time when unfunded federal mandates are increasing the strain on states’ already-strapped budgets.”

The day after the State of the Union, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** held a [joint conference call](#) with key senators to express the sense of urgency and bipartisanship surrounding the work on ESEA reauthorization. “[There is] strong interest in fixing NCLB from both sides of

the aisle ... as well as from governors of both parties and local education leaders from across the country,” Duncan said. “People realize that the current NCLB law has many flaws from mislabeling to overreaching to lowering standards. On many issues, Democrats and Republicans can share a common sense agenda.”

Duncan was joined on the call by **Senators Tom Harkin (D-IA), chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee, Mike Enzi (R-WY), top Republican on the Senate HELP Committee, and Lamar Alexander (R-TN)**, who served as U.S. Secretary of Education under President George H. W. Bush.

During the call, Enzi said he and Alexander had identified nine key areas within NCLB that need to be fixed. Specifically, he noted that the requirement that all students be 100 percent proficient in reading and math by 2014 was a “delicate goal.” Alexander said he was glad to see the president give a lot of attention to the importance of education to the nation’s future in the State of the Union. He praised Duncan and Harkin for “creating an environment” that will allow them to work toward a consensus and sounded a positive note for ESEA reauthorization in 2011.

“I don’t want to make it sound like it’s going to be a piece of cake or too easy, but we’re off to a good start,” Alexander said. “I appreciate the chance to work on it and I look forward to coming up with a consensus that both Democrats and Republicans can support in this year—and the president can sign—to fix the problems with No Child Left Behind.”

Enzi added that Kline and **Representative George Miller (D-CA), top Democrat on the committee**, have also been involved in negotiations. “So we not only have a bipartisan but we have a bicameral [process] where we’re working with the House already on this, too,” Enzi said. “And I think down the road, that will lead to much faster, more agreeable solutions and that’s what we want to have.”

When asked specifically about a timeline for the bill, Harkin said, “I think we’re at a position now to move quickly” and said his goal was to have a bill ready for markup in committee by the Easter recess and ready for the president’s signature by late summer. He noted several areas of consensus that have already emerged, including fixing the accountability system, targeting interventions at the lowest-performing schools, advancing teacher evaluation and improvement systems, and restoring flexibility to states so they can provide innovative and localized ways to help students succeed.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK? Will ESEA Reauthorization Happen in 2011?
Vote in the Alliance’s Poll**

The Alliance for Excellent Education has created a simple “yes” or “no” poll to gauge public sentiment on the likelihood that Congress and President Obama will come to an agreement on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as No Child Left Behind, in 2011.

To vote in the poll, click on the image to the right or go to <http://poll.pollcode.com/qmaU>.

Will the Congress and President Obama finish a rewrite of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as NCLB, in 2011?

Yes

No



CUTS VERSUS BIGGER CUTS: With Congress Beginning Work on Last Year's Spending Bills, Only Certainty Is Reduced Spending, Question Is: How Much?

At the end of last year, members of Congress were unable to come to an agreement on the final appropriations bills that would determine Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 spending levels for the U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies. To keep these programs running, Congress passed a continuing resolution (CR) that funds these programs through March 4, 2011. Now, as Congress works on finishing last year's business, it is becoming evident that many government programs will receive less funding this year than they received last year.

Under a [budget plan](#) released last week by **House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI)**, spending for FY 2011 would be capped at \$1.055 trillion—a \$35 billion cut from last year's levels. The plan would provide \$420 billion for all domestic discretionary spending, which includes everything except spending for defense, homeland security, veterans, and military construction. That total represents a cut of \$43 billion compared to the previous year. Ryan's plan would boost security spending by \$8 billion compared to the previous year.

“Washington's spending spree is over,” Ryan said in a February 3 [statement](#). “As House Republicans pledged—and voted to affirm on the House floor last week—the spending limits will restore sanity to a broken budget process and return spending for domestic government agencies to pre-stimulus, pre-bailout [2008] levels.”

Following Ryan's announcement, **House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers (R-KY)** outlined [spending levels for each of the twelve Appropriations subcommittees](#). The Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee will receive \$157 billion, a cut of \$6.6 billion, or 4 percent, compared to last year, but a 7 percent cut compared to the president's budget request for FY 2011. Other cuts were much deeper, including a 17 percent cut for transportation and housing programs compared to last year; a 16 percent cut for the departments of Justice, Commerce, and State; 14 percent for agriculture, rural development, and the Food and Drug Administration; 13 percent from the Treasury; and 10 percent from energy and water programs.

“I am instructing each of the twelve Appropriations subcommittees to produce specific, substantive, and comprehensive spending cuts,” Rogers said. “We are going line by line to weed out and eliminate unnecessary, wasteful, or excess spending—and produce legislation that will represent the largest series of spending reductions in the history of Congress. These cuts will not be easy, they will be broad and deep, they will affect every congressional district, but they are necessary and long overdue.”

Members of the respective subcommittees will decide how to divvy up the spending cuts among the individual programs under their jurisdictions in the coming days. During the next step in the process, each of the subcommittees' bills will be rolled into a single stand-alone bill. The stand-alone bill will outline the funding total for every program and is scheduled to be considered on the House floor during the week of February 14.

Once the bill is on the House floor, it will be subject to amendments that could possibly reduce spending even further as some Republicans have proposed. For example, **Republican Jim Jordan (R-OH), Chairman of the Republican Study Committee**, introduced the [Spending Reduction Act of 2011](#), which would cut \$2.5 trillion over ten years from the federal budget, including nearly seventy education programs. Additionally, **Representative Jeff Flake (R-AZ)** said that doing anything short of cutting \$100 billion in FY 2011 would be “getting off on the wrong foot,” adding, “We’re going to have to do much better and cut much more.”

After the bill passes the House of Representatives, it will go to the Senate where Democrats control fifty-three seats and are already dismissing the plan as “unworkable,” in the words of **Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV)**. **Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D-ND)** said he was not sure whether a budget-cutting measure could pass the Senate.

Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin (D-IL) urged caution with spending cuts, saying that cuts would need to be made in a way that would not hurt economic recovery. “Let’s do it in a sensible fashion, so that we don’t kill the recovery and we don’t stop the basic services of government,” said Durbin.

One possible alternative to the House approach is a bipartisan effort led by **Senators Bob Corker (R-TN)** and **Claire McCaskill (D-MO)** that would cap spending starting in FY 2013. Their [proposal](#) would gradually cut discretionary and mandatory spending each fiscal year over the next ten years until federal expenditures fall below 21 percent of the nation’s gross domestic product (GDP); currently federal spending is approaching 25 percent of GDP. If Congress fails to meet the annual cap, the bill would authorize the Office of Management and Budget to make evenly distributed, simultaneous cuts throughout the federal budget to bring spending down to the predetermined level. Corker and McCaskill’s proposal has already drawn support from several Republicans, but no Democrats other than McCaskill have signed on.

On the other side of the aisle, **Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY)** said that there will be “extraordinary republican unity” behind efforts to trim spending and is hopeful that some of the more than twenty democratic senators who are up for reelection in 2012 will side with Republicans. “We are going to do everything we can to unify Senate Republicans around it and pick off enough Senate Democrats to send it to the president,” said February 4 on the [Laura Ingraham radio show](#).

Like in the House, there is some support in the Senate for a reduction in spending that would go further than Ryan’s plan. In a [February 4 letter](#) to **House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH)**, a group of eleven republican senators called on the House to make spending cuts totaling no less than \$100 billion. “Since the Democrats still control the Senate, we need the House-passed CR to be as bold as possible in order to strengthen the hand of Senate conservatives in increasing or maintaining the spending reductions,” the letter reads.

With the current CR due to expire on March 4, it is possible that Congress will need to pass another CR to extend the deadline and give the House and Senate more time to work on a compromise that can pass both chambers and be signed into law by the president.

FISCAL YEAR 2012 BUDGET FORTHCOMING: President Obama to Submit Budget Proposal on February 14

President Obama will submit his budget proposal for Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 on Monday, February 14, one week later than the legal requirement. Obama said the delay was necessary because of the delay in confirming **Jacob Lew, the new director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)**. The delay in the budget is not unprecedented and the budget is frequently late when there is a transition from one president to the next.

In a [February 7 op-ed in the New York Times](#), Lew warned that the “easy” cuts have already been made. “As the president said in his State of the Union address, now that the country is back from the brink of a potential economic collapse, our goal is to win the future by out-educating, out-building, and out-innovating our rivals so that we can return to robust economic and job growth,” Lew wrote. “But to make room for the investments we need to foster growth, we have to cut what we cannot afford. We have to reduce the burden placed on our economy by years of deficits and debt.”

During his State of the Union address, Obama proposed to freeze annual domestic spending for the next five years, a move that he said would reduce the deficit by more than \$400 billion over the next decade and “bring discretionary spending to the lowest share of our economy since Dwight Eisenhower was president.”

In his op-ed, Lew said that the president’s FY 2011 budget proposal would cut the Community Service Block Grant program by \$350 million, the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative by \$125 million, and the Community Development Block Grant program by \$300 million. “These three examples alone, of course, represent only a small fraction of the scores of cuts the president had to choose, but they reflect the tough calls he had to make,” Lew wrote.

It is unclear how the president’s proposed freeze in domestic spending will affect the U.S. Department of Education. In last year’s budget proposal, Obama proposed a three-year overall freeze in nonsecurity spending, but still provided an increase for the U.S. Department of Education; it is unclear whether the president will use the same approach this year.



STATE OF THE STATES: Governors Offer Various Proposals to Improve Student Achievement

West Virginia: Tomblin Recommends One-Time, Across-the-Board Bonus for Teachers

The West Virginia Constitution currently gives **Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin (D)** the duty of acting as governor after **Former Governor Joe Manchin (D)** was elected to serve in the U.S. Senate. During his January 12 [state of the state address](#), Tomblin proposed a one-time, across-the-board \$800 bonus for teachers and \$500 bonus for state employees and school service personnel. The governor also announced that his budget would support a 2005 initiative that rewards every teacher in West Virginia an approximate 1.5 annual percent pay raise. “Frankly, it should be more and we all need to continue to strive for a day when our teachers are paid at a rate equivalent to the most important role they play in our children’s lives,” he said.

In his address, Tomblin also focused on reducing the high school dropout rate, eliminating the high level of teacher vacancies, and focusing on developing vocational skills for students starting in middle school.

Nebraska: Heineman Supports Development of Statewide Virtual High School

During his January 13 [inaugural remarks](#), **Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman (R)** said, “Even though Nebraska has a nearly \$1 billion projected shortfall, our two-year budget prioritizes

education.” He proposed budget cuts to other state agencies but called for state aid to education in Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 to remain at \$810 million and to increase to \$860 million in FY 2013. Heineman also strongly supported the development of a statewide virtual high school and estimated the initiative would cost \$8.5 million, which he proposed financing through lottery funds.

“A virtual high school would allow Nebraska high school students to take courses ranging from basic Spanish classes to Advanced Placement courses,” said Heineman. “In rural Nebraska, it can be difficult to hire foreign language, math, and science teachers. A virtual high school would allow rural schools and rural communities the opportunity to survive. Online courses allow students to complete course work on their timetables in the evenings or on weekends.”

Heineman expressed his support for **Senator Brad Ashford’s (R-Omaha)** efforts to reduce truancy and explained that last year, 22,000 students missed more than twenty days of school. He also proposed a Nebraska Internship Program as one component to a four-part plan to enhance economic growth. The program would assist more college students in interning with Nebraska businesses and would be funded through resources from the Nebraska Job Training Cash fund and matched by private sector funds.

New Mexico: Martinez Introduces Education Reform Package

New Mexico Governor Susana Martinez (R) presented a comprehensive reform package to transform schools during her [state of the state address](#) on January 18. The plan, “Kids First, New Mexico Wins,” is comprised of four key initiatives including shifting dollars from bureaucracy and into the classroom; adopting an “easy-to-understand, easy-to-implement” letter-grade accountability system for schools; ending social promotion; and rewarding New Mexico’s best teachers. The governor particularly focused on eradicating social promotion, the practice of passing children from one grade to the next before they have actually mastered the content.

“Too many are afraid to focus on student achievement, so we shuttle too many kids to the next grade, even if they haven’t learned the basics,” said Martinez. “That implicitly tells little boys and girls that it’s okay that they don’t achieve. My fellow New Mexicans, telling children, regardless of how subtle, that they are not capable of achieving is morally wrong. We must end the culture of low expectations. Stop accepting failure.”

In line with her interest to shift education dollars away from administration costs and into the classroom, the governor said her budget would require the education bureaucracy to trim 1.5 percent.

Kentucky: Beshear Backs Legislation to Raise Mandatory School Attendance Age

On February 1, during his [state of the state address](#), **Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear (D)** recognized the hard work of teachers, principals, school board members, superintendents, and university presidents in raising student achievement levels in the state. At the same time he warned, “But we must not be satisfied, because we are not yet where we should be.”

The governor advocated for moving ahead with legislation focused on improving academic standards, assessments, leadership, and teaching and learning. He also expressed his support for

a bill designed to address the problem of high school dropouts and would establish alternative education programs to provide more options to students that do not learn well in a traditional setting. The bill would also require schools, over the next five years, to phase in a new requirement that Kentucky students must attend school until age eighteen. Since 1934, sixteen has been the legal age a student can drop out of school in the state.

Last year, a bill to raise the dropout age passed in the House but not in the Senate because the legislation did not include funding to pay for programs designed to help at-risk students who otherwise would have dropped out. In a recent article in the [Courier Journal](#), **Senator Ken Winters (R-Murray)** said opposition to this year's bill still exists because of the belief that youths forced to remain in school would be resentful and disruptive.

Nevada: Sandoval Suggests Budget Cuts in K–12 Education

“As governor, part of my job is to tell people things they don’t like to hear,” said **Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval (R)** during his [state of the state address](#) on January 24. “And when it comes to education in our state, I want to level with the people of Nevada. Our education system is broken. Not the people, but the system. While many teachers, professors, and students are excelling, collectively they are held back by an antiquated system that emphasizes too many of the wrong things – and for which the only suggested answer has been more and more money.”

During his speech, Sandoval focused on Nevada’s \$1.2 billion budget hole and called for basic support in Nevada’s K–12 schools to be reduced by \$270 per student. He said the budget cuts were in reason if the education establishment was willing to make real changes in how the dollars were spent. The governor’s plan has not been well-received among the local education community. The [Associated Press](#) recently reported, “Critics have painted his plan as a commitment to dumbing down Nevada.” In the same story, **Allison Turner, president of the Nevada Parent Teach Association**, said the governor’s agenda is “a pretty major step backward.”

Sandoval spoke about education at length during his address and recommended the creation of a block grant program in order to give districts more flexibility in determining what school improvement methods worked best for them. The program would rest on three key components: flexibility, local autonomy, and accountability. He also backed a number of other school reform efforts including ending teacher tenure, relying on student achievement data to evaluate educators, offering incentive pay to teachers, ending social promotion, and reforming K–12 governance so the governor has the authority to appoint state board of education members and the superintendent.

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; Emily Roosa, writer; 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>.