



StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



LAST CUT IS THE DEEPEST: Final FY 2011 Spending Agreement Cuts Spending by Nearly \$40 Billion, Includes More Cuts for Education Programs

After months of negotiations, House Republicans, Senate Democrats, and the White House finally came to an agreement on a long-term continuing resolution (CR) that establishes final spending levels for Fiscal Year (FY) 2011, which officially began more than six months ago. Under the CR, named the Department of Defense and Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act, which the president signed into law on April 15, federal spending was cut by nearly \$40 billion, compared to FY 2010.¹

The CR gives agencies wide authority over the final spending levels for programs within their jurisdiction, unless those programs were specifically mentioned in the text of the CR. Agencies will also be bound by the top-level dollar figures in their program accounts. Because the U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies have thirty days after April 15th to submit their spending plans to Congress, the true extent of cuts made to federal education programs not specifically mentioned in the CR will be unknown until spending plans are released.

Based on the text of the CR, funding was eliminated for Striving Readers (\$200 million), Educational Technology State Grants (\$100 million), and Smaller Learning Communities (\$88 million). Because the agreement included a 0.2 percent across-the-board cut, nearly every education program was affected in some way. Programs targeted for additional cuts beyond the across-the-board cut include the School Improvement Grants program, which targets the nation's lowest-performing schools, and Grants for State Assessments program, which provides funding to states to implement their assessment systems.

Title I and special education received the same funding total as last year, but, after adjusting for the 0.2 percent across-the-board cut, the programs will receive slightly less—\$14.46 billion and \$11.48 billion, respectively. The agreement left the maximum Pell Grant award unchanged at \$5,550.

Programs receiving an increase under the agreement were Race to the Top, which received \$700 million and Investing in Innovation (I3), which received \$150 million. Only states will be able to

¹ Per the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), the final spending agreement's "budget authority" for FY 2011 is \$1,049.8 billion compared to \$1,087.5 billion for FY 2010, a difference of \$37.7 billion. However, because "many of the reductions in budget authority for mandatory programs would have little or no effect on outlays in 2011 or future years," [CBO estimates](#) that the change in cumulative outlays under the agreement is closer to between \$20 billion and \$25 billion than the \$37.7 billion reduction in 2011 budget authority. For additional information, read the layman's explanation by [Washington Post reporter Ezra Klein](#).

apply for this new Race to the Top funding. Additionally, the CR added an assurance directing states that apply for Race to the Top funding to take actions to improve access to early childhood care and education as a condition of receiving Race to the Top funds.

In a [statement of administration policy](#) issued on April 14, the Obama administration said it “would not have agreed to many of these cuts under better fiscal circumstances,” but stated that the agreement “reflects a compromise that will help the Federal Government live within its means”

Republicans were quick to cast the agreement as the first step of many to reduce government spending. “We’ve taken a small but crucial step in getting Washington to live within its means without disrupting people’s lives,” [said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell \(R-KY\)](#). “And while no one would argue that these cuts come close to achieving balance in government spending, neither would anyone deny the dramatic shift they represent. ... This debate will soon move from a debate about billions in savings to a discussion about how we save trillions”



EVERY STUDENT COUNTS: Senator Harkin and Representative Scott Introduce Legislation to Establish Common Formula for High School Graduation Rates and Set 90 Percent Graduation Rate Goal

On April 7, **Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA)** and **Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA)** introduced the Every Student Counts Act (ESCA), which would require all states to calculate their graduation rates using the same formula and to set a graduation rate goal of 90 percent for all students and disadvantaged populations. This legislation would codify and strengthen regulations developed in 2008 by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) that requires states to use a single, accurate graduation rate calculation; establish graduation rate goals; and set annual growth targets.

“The current high school accountability system is failing our students and undermining our future as a globally competitive nation,” [Scott said](#). “The major advantage America has in the global economy is an educated workforce. We can’t allow—or afford—any of our nation’s high students to dropout and not reach their full potential.”

Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), graduation rates must be included in adequate yearly progress (AYP) determinations for high schools. However, NCLB does not provide a standardized formula for calculating graduation rates, nor does it require states to set meaningful graduation rate goals. The result is a patchwork of inconsistent graduation rate goals and calculations across the nation, leading to inaccurate reporting of graduation rates.

In October 2008, ED issued regulations requiring states and schools to use a single, accurate calculation of the graduation rate beginning at the end of the 2010–11 school year. ESCA would codify these regulations while setting meaningful graduation rate goals and growth targets. It would set a graduation rate goal of 90 percent for all students and require schools, districts, and states with graduation rates below 90 percent—in the aggregate or for any subgroup—to increase their graduation rates by 3 percentage points per year to make AYP.

ESCA would ensure that test scores and graduation rates are weighted equally when determining AYP by holding schools accountable for ensuring that students graduate from high school, while making sure that schools do not have an incentive to push out low-performing students in order to increase the schools' test scores. It would also include a cumulative graduation rate provision that would give schools, districts, and states credit for graduating students who may take longer than the typical four years to graduate with a regular diploma. Such a provision would also provide incentives for schools, districts, and states to create programs to serve students who have already dropped out and are over-age or undercredited.

“Along with the 2008 ED regulations, the Every Student Counts Act would help bring method to the madness of high school graduation rate calculations,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Graduation rates are not only an indicator of a school’s success, they are also a critical predictor of a community’s economic health. Nearly 1.3 million students did not graduate from high school in 2010, costing the nation over \$337 billion in lost lifetime earnings.”

Representatives Hansen Clarke (D-MI), Danny Davis (D-IL), Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ), Rubén Hinojosa (D-TX), Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-IL), Gwen Moore (D-WI), and Donald Payne (D-NJ) are original cosponsors of the Every Student Counts Act.

For more information about ESCA, visit <http://bit.ly/hUYOyi>.



HIGH SCHOOL TRANSCRIPT STUDY: Study of 2009 High School Graduates Reveals Importance of a Rigorous Curriculum to Future Success

Released on April 13 by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) High School Transcript Study finds that the percentage of high school graduates completing a “rigorous” curriculum, which includes higher-level math and science courses, increased from 5 percent in 1990 to 13 percent in 2009. At the same time, the percentage of students who took *less* than a “standard” curriculum of at least four credits of English and three each in social studies, mathematics, and science, declined from 60 percent in 1990 to 25 percent in 2009.

Graduates completing a rigorous curriculum earned the highest NAEP mathematics and science scores. According to the report, *America’s High School Graduates: Results of the 2009 NAEP High School Transcript Study*, graduates whose first high school math course was geometry scored 55 points higher on the NAEP mathematics assessment than graduates who took a class below Algebra I. Similarly, graduates who completed chemistry in ninth grade scored 27 points higher on NAEP science than graduates who took earth science. In general, high school graduates who completed a rigorous curriculum had average NAEP scores at the *proficient* level, while graduates completing a standard or midlevel curriculum placed at the *basic* level on NAEP.

Defining Curriculum Levels

The High School Transcript Study classifies student course-taking by three curriculum levels:

Standard: At least four credits of English and three each in social studies, mathematics, and science.

Midlevel: In addition to standard requirements, geometry and Algebra I or II; at least two courses in biology, chemistry, and physics; and at least one credit of a foreign language.

Rigorous: In addition to midlevel requirements, an additional credit in mathematics including pre-calculus or higher; biology, chemistry, and physics; and at least three foreign language credits.

“These findings demonstrate a clear connection between course rigor and achievement, and they argue strongly for students to take a more challenging curriculum in our high schools,” said **David P. Driscoll, chair of NAGB**, which sets policy for NAEP. “Rigor in high school is closely linked to success afterwards, and this study confirms that we need higher secondary standards across the board. In particular, we need stronger requirements in math and science.”

When broken down by race and ethnicity, the percentages of students who completed less than a standard curriculum declined for all student groups. As shown in the table below, the percentage of Hispanic students who completed below a standard curriculum decreased from 69 percent in 1990 to 33 percent in 2009, while black students completing below a standard curriculum declined from 60 percent to 21 percent—four percentage points better than white students.

Student Subgroup	Percentage Completing Below a Standard Curriculum		Percentage Completing a Rigorous Curriculum	
	1990	2009	1990	2009
Asian	50%	23%	13%	29%
Black	60%	21%	2%	6%
Hispanic	69%	33%	2%	8%
White	59%	25%	5%	14%

But while black graduates were less likely to complete below a standard curriculum than their white classmates, they, as well as Hispanic graduates, were also less likely to complete a rigorous curriculum than white graduates. Meanwhile, at 29 percent, Asian graduates were most likely to complete a rigorous curriculum.

“The state-led effort to develop common core state standards in English language arts and math could not come at a better time,” said Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise. “By adopting common standards, states now have defined what a rigorous curriculum looks like and what is needed to succeed in college and careers. But adopting the standards and providing rigorous courses isn’t enough; students also need the support and resources necessary to succeed.”

Overall, high school graduates from the Class of 2009 earned an average of 27.2 credits, compared to 23.6 credits in 1990, the first year of the High School Transcript Study. This trend of additional credits earned holds true when the results are broken down by sex, race, and ethnicity. Each credit represents 120 hours of classroom instruction, meaning that 2009 graduates received more than 400 hours of additional instruction time, compared to their 1990 counterparts. Graduates’ average grade point average also increased from 2.68 in 1990 to 3.00 in 2009.

The High School Transcript Study is based on transcripts collected from more than six hundred public schools and 130 private schools. The transcripts constitute a nationally representative sample of 37,700 public and private high school graduates representing approximately three million high school graduates from the Class of 2009.

The complete report is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2011462.pdf>.

Alliance to Hold Webinar on the 2009 High School Transcript Study

On Wednesday, April 20, from 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., ET, the Alliance for Excellent Education will host a webinar to unpack the findings from the High School Transcript Study. The webinar will also focus on how the Common Core State Standards Initiative, digital learning, and other education reform initiatives can increase access to and success in rigorous courses while preparing all students for success in college and their careers.

Featured speakers will include **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance and former governor of West Virginia, Jack Buckley, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, and David Driscoll, chair of NAGB and former commissioner of education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.** The webinar will also provide an opportunity for the speakers to address questions submitted by viewers across the country.

To register for the webinar and ask questions, go to <http://media.all4ed.org/registration-apr-20>.



STATE TEST SCORE TRENDS: New Report Finds Eighth-Grade Students Making Steady Progress on Math and Reading State Tests

Although student achievement in eighth grade is widely perceived as not improving, a new Center for Education Policy (CEP) study argues that eighth-grade students seem to be making progress, particularly in math. However, the report, *State Test Score Trends through 2008–09, Part 3: Student Achievement at 8th Grade* also finds persistent achievement gaps in the advanced level of achievement.

The study analyzes trends from state reading and math tests, which are required for accountability purposes under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). It examines the percentage of students scoring at or above the proficient level of achievement—the main indicator of progress under NCLB—as well as the percentage scoring above the basic and advanced levels. The data includes results from 2002 through 2009 for students overall and for the major subgroups tracked under NCLB. The report notes that test data was not considered if, during the period of analysis, a state had introduced new tests or changed its benchmarks for proficiency.

According to the study, forty-two states—100 percent of the states studied—showed gains in their percentages of eighth-grade students reaching the advanced level in math. In reading, thirty-five states showed increases in their percentages of eighth-grade students reaching the advanced level; five states showed declines and two states showed no change. The report also compares trends at grade eight with trends at grade four and the high school grade tested in each state for NCLB and found that in both subjects, a larger proportion of states showed gains at grade eight than at the other two grades for all three achievement levels.

“It’s widely perceived that students in the middle grades are doing poorly,” said **Jack Jennings, president and chief executive officer of CEP.** “If that were true, we would expect to see flat scores and little progress when compared with elementary or high schools. To the contrary, more states showed gains at grade eight than showed gains at grade four and high school.”

The report points out that these trend lines do not acknowledge the large differences among states in the percentages of students who score at advanced or proficient levels. For example, in eighth-grade reading, New York reported that only 5 percent of its students reached the advanced level on its state test while Utah and Kansas reported that 61 percent of its eighth-grade students scored at the advanced level. It was a similar story in math—New Mexico reported that only 7

percent of its students reached the advanced level while two states, Kansas and Virginia, reported that more than 50 percent of its students scored at the advanced level.

There was also a notable difference among states in the percentages of students scoring proficient in math and reading. While the District of Columbia reported that 45 percent of students were proficient on state tests in reading, Nebraska reported 95 percent of students as proficient. As for states reporting percentages of students reaching the basic level, most came in at 80 or 90 percent in reading and 70 percent in math.

State Test Score Trends through 2008–09, Part 3 also analyzes 2009 reading and math scores by student subgroups including African American, Asian American, Latino, Native American, white, and low-income students. Asian American eighth graders outperformed all subgroups in reading and math at the proficient and advanced level. The study also finds widening achievement gaps at the advanced level for African American, Latino, and Native American eighth graders in the majority of states in the study. In addition, the gap in math achievement between low-income students and non low-income students also widened in all but one state.

The report authors compare their findings to other international student assessment tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which shows that eighth-grade reading scores remained flat between 2002 and 2009 and eighth-grade math scores increased steadily and slowly over the same period. The CEP study also shows more progress in eighth-grade math than in reading. NAEP and state tests also differ in content, format, administration, and definitions in proficiency. CEP offers the explanation that students could be more motivated to do well on state tests because they are connected to higher stakes.

To read the full report visit <http://www.cep-dc.org/>.



DOUBLE JEOPARDY: New Report Examines the Impact that Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Have on High School Graduation Rates

Students who do not read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers, according to a new report commissioned by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The report, *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*, bases its findings on a longitudinal study of nearly 4,000 students who were born between 1979 and 1989.

“We will never close the achievement gap, we will never solve our dropout crisis, we will never break the cycle of poverty that afflicts so many children if we don’t make sure that all our students learn to read,” said **Ralph Smith, executive vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation**. “This research confirms the compelling need to address the underlying issues that keep children from reading.”

According to the report, only 4 percent of students who are proficient in reading by third grade fail to graduate from high school, compared to 16 percent of students who are not reading at grade level by third grade. Among third-grade students who lack even the most basic reading skills, 23 percent fail to graduate from high school. These students, who account for one-third of all students, make up more than 60 percent of all students who do not graduate from high school.

Poor reading skills have an even more adverse impact on students of color. According to the report, black and Hispanic students who are not reading proficiently by third grade are 11 to 12 percentage points less likely to graduate from high school than white students with similar reading skills.

The report also finds that poverty compounds the program and plays a critical role in whether students will develop the reading skills they need to succeed in school. It notes that 83 percent of children in low-income families have reading skills below the proficient level.

“Children in poor families are in double jeopardy,” the report notes. “They are more likely to have low reading test scores and, at any reading-skill level, they are less likely to graduate from high school.”

Indeed, *Double Jeopardy* finds that 22 percent of children who have lived in poverty do not graduate from high school, compared to only 6 percent of children who have never been poor. Nearly one-third of children who have spent more than half of their childhood in poverty do not earn a high school diploma.

Among children with both risk factors—they have lived in poverty and have reading skills below the proficient level—26 percent do not graduate from high school, compared to 9 percent of students who have below-proficient reading skills but have never experienced poverty. Overall, the report finds that children who spend a year or more in poverty account for 38 percent of all children, but they represent 70 percent of all high school dropouts.

In conducting the study, researchers divided children into three reading groups that roughly correspond to the skill levels used in the National Assessment of Educational Progress: proficient, basic, and below basic. Children were also separated into three groups based on their experience with poverty: those who had never been poor, those who had spent some time in poverty, and those who had lived more than half of their lives in poverty.

The complete report is available at <http://bit.ly/h4kt41>.

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 Kingsland, 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>.