



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **PROBLEMS DOWN THE ROAD: House Passes Congressional Budget Resolutions, Sets Overall Spending Cap at \$19 Billion Below Senate**

On March 29, the U.S. House of Representatives adopted a congressional budget resolution that would cap discretionary spending in Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 at \$1.028 trillion, or \$19 billion below the level set by [last summer's deal to raise the debt ceiling](#). With the U.S. Senate sticking to the spending levels set by the debt ceiling agreement, the two chambers will begin the appropriations process with a spending goal that is approximately \$19 billion apart. This large disparity will likely lead to difficult negotiations on federal spending priorities, including education spending, later in the year.

“Elected representatives have a solemn obligation to help ensure that our children have more opportunity and inherit a stronger America than our parents gave us,” [said House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan \(R-WI\)](#). “The Democrat-controlled Senate has failed to pass a budget in over 1,000 days, while the president still refuses to offer credible solutions to the most predictable economic crisis in our history. Empty promises from Washington won’t pay our bills, strengthen our health and retirement programs, fix our economy, or create jobs. Such irresponsibility will, however, lead to a debt crisis that will fundamentally change America for the worse.”

House Democrats were united in their opposition to the budget resolution. “Today, House Republicans made their choice for America’s future abundantly clear: abandon the economic recovery, end the Medicare guarantee, and slash investments for national priorities—all to provide a whopping average tax break of almost \$400,000 for people making over \$1 million a year,” [said Representative Chris Van Hollen \(D-MD\), top Democrat on the House Budget Committee](#). “It is a path to greater prosperity if you’re already wealthy, but it leaves seniors, working Americans, and future generations behind. The question is not whether we reduce the deficit, but how—and the choices in this Republican budget are simply wrong for America.”

In the Senate, [Majority Leader Harry Reid \(D-NV\) said](#) that the Senate would not consider its own version of a budget resolution, arguing that last year’s agreement on the debt ceiling set spending caps for FY 2013 and beyond.



## **COMPETITIVE VERSUS FORMULA: Secretary Duncan Defends Obama FY 2013 Budget Request on Capitol Hill**

Testifying before the House Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education Appropriations Subcommittee on March 22, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** said President Obama’s Fiscal Year 2013 budget “reflects his strong commitment to achieving long-

term deficit reduction,” but recognizes that cutting back on investments in education could risk America’s continued economic prosperity. As in the past, Duncan heard criticism from members of both parties for the president’s decision to increase funding for competitive programs, such as Race to the Top, while formula programs, such as Title I, are kept at the previous year’s level.

“I was very disappointed when I saw that, with the nearly \$2 billion in new money allocated for education resources in the president’s budget this year, you didn’t put the funds into IDEA ... Title I ... Impact Aid ... rural education ... or TRIO,” [said House Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Denny Rehberg \(R-MT\)](#). “I notice a pattern here. Many other aspects of your budget request also echo the theme of less money for tried-and-true formula grant programs to states and more money in flexible pots for brand new ideas left entirely to your discretion—and yours alone, without congressional input—to distribute.”

Similarly, [Representative Rosa DeLauro \(D-CT\), top Democrat on the subcommittee, also said](#) she was “concerned” with the emphasis on competitive grants and noted that the president’s budget would increase competitive grants by \$2.8 billion while formula funds would fall by \$1.2 billion. At the same time, however, she was “excited” about the Early Learning Challenge Grants designed to improve childcare quality and prepare children for success in school.

During his testimony, Duncan said competitive programs such as Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation (i3) in FY 2012 were “creating incentives and promoting new thinking” at the state and local levels about transforming teacher and learning. He said these incentives were one of four priorities in the president’s budget, along with improving affordability and quality in postsecondary education; elevating the teaching profession; and strengthening the connections between school and work and better aligning job training programs with workforce demands.

Duncan also addressed the looming cuts to military and domestic spending that were triggered when the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, aka the “supercommittee,” failed to agree on a plan to reduce the nation’s deficit. These automatic across-the-board cuts totaling \$1.2 trillion, formally called “sequestration,” will go into effect in January 2013. (For background on these automatic cuts, visit [http://www.all4ed.org/publication\\_material/straight\\_as/11282011#1](http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/straight_as/11282011#1).)

According to Duncan, the impact of these cuts would be “both significant and very negative [and], in a word ... devastating.” He said the cuts, which would result in a 7.8 percent drop in domestic discretionary spending, would make it “impossible” to achieve the U.S. Department of Education’s fundamental mission to prepare students for college and a career. Specifically, Duncan noted that Title I would be cut by \$1.2 billion, denying funding to nearly 4,000 schools serving more than 1.6 million disadvantaged students and could result in more than 16,000 teachers and aides losing their jobs.

“At a time when we are just starting to see strong signs of renewed economic growth, as well as the positive impact of historic education reforms that will contribute to future growth and prosperity, it just makes no sense at all to undermine this progress through a sequester of federal discretionary spending,” Duncan said. (Duncan’s complete testimony is available at <http://appropriations.house.gov/CalendarArchive/EventSingle.aspx?EventID=281196>).

## **SUPERINTENDENTS WEIGH IN: House Appropriations Subcommittee Hears from School Superintendents on President Obama’s Budget Request**

On March 27, the House Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education Appropriations Subcommittee held another hearing on the president’s Fiscal Year 2013 K–12 education budget that featured school superintendents from around the country who addressed the formula funding versus competitive funding debate, asked for increased federal spending on education, and called on Congress to revamp the No Child Left Behind Act.

During the hearing, **Dr. Gwile Freeman, superintendent of the Catahoula Parish School District (Louisiana)**, noted that formula funding gives rural and small school the ability to utilize resources in a way that competitive grants cannot, “simply because [they] often lack the capacity to write competitive grant applications.” At the same time, however, Freeman acknowledged that Louisiana was one of six states to receive a Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy grant, which will help the state respond to the unique needs of struggling readers and writers in local school districts.

Additional witnesses were **Dr. Tim Mitchell, superintendent of Rapid City Area Schools (South Dakota)**, who focused on special education and the needs of rural schools and **Ron Seaver, superintendent of Central Union Elementary School District (California)**, who discussed the importance of the Impact Aid program. **Dr. Joshua P. Starr, superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools (Maryland)**, also testified about how his district has used an Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to implement new curriculum in elementary grades that integrates all subject areas and helps students develop the critical academic and thinking skills necessary in today’s economy.

Complete witness testimony from the hearing is available at <http://appropriations.house.gov/Calendar/EventSingle.aspx?EventID=281200>.



### **CONFRONTING THE CRISIS: New Alliance Report Offers Solutions for Nation’s Literacy Crisis**

More than 60 percent of twelfth-grade students leave high school without the advanced reading and writing skills needed to succeed in college and a career, seriously constraining their future employment options and restricting national and state economies, according to a new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education. The report, *Confronting the Crisis: Federal Investments in State Birth-Through-Grade-Twelve Literacy Education*, identifies promising solutions underway at the state level, including implementing the newly adopted common core state standards in English language arts (ELA) and the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy (SRCL) program. It also includes recommendations for how the federal government can help states build upon these initial efforts and ensure that all young people graduate from high school with the advanced skills essential for success in the modern world.

“While the trend lines for educational and workforce demands are steadily rising, students’ reading and writing skills are not keeping pace,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “This results in unprepared college students taking remedial courses, employers spending more money on job training, and good jobs going unfilled because of a lack of qualified candidates. This is a critical time for the federal government to partner with all states by fully investing in comprehensive literacy plans to ensure that every student graduates from high school with the advanced skills necessary for success in college and a career.”

The report notes that since 1973, the share of jobs in the United States requiring postsecondary education has increased from 28 percent to 60 percent. During the same time period, however, the literacy performance of seventeen-year-olds has remained the same. Additionally, 25 percent

of eighth graders nationwide lack even partial mastery of grade-level knowledge and skills, according to the 2011 Nation's Report Card in reading, putting these students at risk of dropping out before earning a high school diploma.

The good news is that states are taking action to increase students' literacy achievement. Forty-six states and the District of Columbia have adopted the common core state standards in ELA. Additionally, forty-six states and the District of Columbia received federal funding under the SRCL program in 2010 to develop a plan to improve literacy development and education across early education programs, elementary schools, and middle and high schools. However, as *Confronting the Crisis* points out, additional funding for the SRCL program is in doubt. So far, only six states (Georgia, Louisiana, Montana, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Texas) have received a second round of funding to put their plans into practice, shutting out the remaining forty.

“Unless Congress provides additional funding for the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program, state literacy plans are more likely to sit on a shelf and gather dust than they are to help improve students' reading skills in the classroom,” Wise said.

According to the brief, federal investments in literacy have centered on the early grades and have largely ignored middle and high school students. Even though a concerted investment in K–3 reading produced the highest achievement in reading for fourth-grade students in thirty-three years, it has proved insufficient to inoculate against failure in the upper grades.

Without the reading and writing skills needed to succeed in college, students often must take remedial classes, which offer no credit toward a degree. According to the report, 44 percent of all students at public two-year institutions and 27 percent of all students at public four-year institutions enrolled in remedial courses. Remedial education at the postsecondary level costs the nation an estimated \$3.6 billion annually. Additionally, students who enroll in a remedial reading course are more than three times less likely to earn a bachelor's degree within eight years than are students who take no remedial education courses.

The report notes that restoring funding for the SRCL program to \$250 million would expand the number of states that are able to implement research-based, comprehensive systems to strengthen student literacy. Additionally, it says that the pending reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently known as No Child Left Behind, offers the best opportunity for the federal government to help states implement a seamless system of literacy development and education at the early childhood, elementary, and secondary levels. Should ESEA reauthorization stall, the report suggests the federal government do the following:

- **Support the voluntary, state-led movement to adopt college- and career-ready ELA standards and aligned assessments** to ensure that students receive a consistent, high-quality education.
- **Enhance the role of states in improving literacy instruction** by supporting the implementation of state-led comprehensive literacy plans for students from birth through grade twelve.
- **Support and invest in increasing the quality of teacher education and professional development** to ensure that teachers acquire the competencies to provide literacy instruction aligned to the ELA standards.

- **Invest in ongoing research and evaluation** to promote better understanding of adolescent literacy and the factors that impact the implementation and effectiveness of literacy programs.

*Confronting the Crisis* is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/ConfrontingTheCrisis.pdf>.



## ***U.S. EDUCATION REFORM AND NATIONAL SECURITY: New Report Says United States's Failure to Educate Its Students Is National Security Threat***

The failure of the United States to educate its children adequately leaves the nation's economy and national security at risk, according to a new report from the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). The report pinpoints a mediocre high school graduation rate, a persistent racial and economic achievement gap, and civic apathy as critical components that result in students who are unprepared to compete globally. This shortfall, the report argues, threatens the country's competitiveness and standing as a leader in the global economy.

The report, *U.S. Education Reform and National Security*, from the CFR-sponsored Independent Task Force, draws attention to the fact that American students lag far behind their international peers in reading, mathematics, and science, despite investing more in K–12 education than any other developed country in the world. The Task Force—led by **Joel I. Klein, former chancellor of New York City Schools**, and **Condoleezza Rice, former U.S. Secretary of State**—is comprised of prominent education experts, national security authorities, and corporate leaders. The panel concludes that the substandard performance of America's youth jeopardizes the country in five critical national security areas: (1) economic growth and competitiveness, (2) global awareness, (3) national unity and cohesion, (4) physical safety, and (5) intellectual property.

“Human capital will determine power in the current century, and the failure to produce that capital will undermine America's security,” the report states. “Large, undereducated swaths of the population damage the ability of the United States to physically defend itself, protect its secure information, conduct diplomacy, and grow its economy.”

According to the report, an increasing number of young people are ineligible for the high-skilled jobs that are beginning to dominate the global economy due to a deficit in science, math, and reading skills. That lack of adequate education, as well as criminal records and an inability to meet basic qualifications of physical fitness, mean that too many young people are unable to enlist for military service. Consequently, vacancies for needed personnel in national and cyber security professions are left unfilled, causing a threat to the nation, the report finds.

“National security is broader than what you can do with your military forces,” Rice told National Public Radio (NPR) in an [interview](#). “When it comes to the very tangible assets that the United States needs to defend itself—the education of people who can be soldiers—too many people can't qualify.”

The report highlights graduation rates as a key factor jeopardizing the future prosperity of the United States. Because of disparities between the education skills and workforce demands, poorly educated and semi-skilled Americans cannot compete for jobs and struggle to contribute to society. Additionally, a shortage of students in the science, technology, engineering, and math

(STEM) fields makes it difficult for defense-related employers, both in the governmental and private sectors, to find qualified candidates. Furthermore, the lack of foreign-language speakers in the United States is leaving important job vacancies in the U.S. Foreign Service, the intelligence community, and American companies abroad unfilled, the report finds.

“The lack of language skills and civic and global awareness among American citizens increasingly jeopardizes their ability to interact with local and global peers or participate meaningfully in business, diplomatic, and military situations,” the report says.

The report also notes that too many American public schools have stopped teaching civics, resulting in students lacking knowledge of their own national history, traditions, and values. At the same time, students have become ignorant of other cultures of the world, meaning students are unprepared to exercise basic rights or fulfill core responsibilities.

Inequity in education is one of the most influential contributors to the nation’s declining global economic and security imprint according to the report. It contends that resources and expertise are not distributed equitably, thus students who face the greatest academic hardships have access to fewer resources and are exposed to unqualified teachers and principals.

“Today, the sad fact is that, for the children who have the fewest options, the educational system is not delivering. If I can look at your zip code and I can tell whether you’re going to get a good education, we’ve got a real problem,” Rice told NPR.

To combat this epidemic in the American education system, the report makes three policy recommendations:

- (1) Implement educational expectations and assessments in subjects vital to protecting national security. Specifically, the report recommends that states expand the common core state standards to include STEM and foreign language, thereby ensuring that students are mastering the skills and knowledge necessary to safeguard the country’s national security.
- (2) Make structural changes to provide students with good choices and “stop locking disadvantaged students into failing schools without any options.”
- (3) Launch a “national security readiness audit” that includes the creation of “more meaningful assessments and simulations of student learning” to hold schools and policymakers accountable for results while raising public awareness.

The task force expressed hope that consideration of America’s education failings as a national security threat will mobilize new constituents, energize advocates, spur policymakers into action, and attract increased investments in reform efforts. “Calling the crisis in education a national security concern is not a gimmick or an empty phrase,” the report reads. “With a failing economy, a stalemated political system, and a waning international presence, the United States stands at a crossroads. Americans can either accept U.S. decline or can come together to support and implement fundamental and radical changes that put the country back on track to fulfilling its promise and potential.”

The report also includes dissenting views written by members of the task force who endorsed the report, but disagreed with certain aspects of it. Download the report at <http://on.cfr.org/HbjpIn>.

## ***IT TAKES A WHOLE SOCIETY: New Report Says High School Years Should Blend Academic and Applied Learning, Provide Students with Window to Outside World***

The high school system currently in place only offers standard, textbook-learning environments that are not conducive to the multifaceted workforce and postsecondary educational field that is developing today, according to a new report from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF), a New England-based organization dedicated to student-centered learning in high schools. With high school dropout rates at crisis levels, the report, *It Takes a Whole Society: Opening Up the Learning Landscape in the High School Years*, implores the American education system to become more adaptive to the changing culture and environments of young people rather than leaving it up to young people to make their way.

“In high school, young people are learning more about their own strengths, limitations, and qualities; beginning to find their own voice; and beginning to forge personal goals,” said **Robert Halpern, professor at the Erikson Institute and author of the report**. “We need to recognize and support different kinds of learning in high school that allow young people to grapple with a complex, shifting adult world.”

According to the report, the majority of high schools are focused too narrowly on a one-size-fits-all method of instruction in which schools offer a uniform curriculum that does not account for the growing diversity of young people. It argues that the American high school system, by assuming college is the only final objective, “may actually choke” the learning experiences of young people and limit opportunities for expansive learning beyond the classroom. As a result, it finds many high school youths are “unclear about where they might fit in the larger world beyond their neighborhood and peer group.” The report adds that this problem can be “especially acute” for students from working-class families who have less information about the kinds of postsecondary learning and preparation needed for specific occupations. Instead, the report urges a move toward incorporating multiple industries and outside partners to engage students fully in alternative learning opportunities.

The report insists that students’ high school years should provide a window to the adult world by blending academic and applied learning through introduction of apprenticeships, project-based learning, and other real-world applications. According to the report, this type of work reflects real tasks and consequences and helps engage students in useful work that results in tangible outcomes relevant to their lives. It says that students will also contribute to a community, build team skills, and learn to link their personal experience to the bigger social, moral, and ethical problems in today’s society.

*It Takes a Whole Society* suggests reevaluating all aspects of traditional learning, including who should be involved in high school education, how students should be assessed, and how schools and educators are evaluated. The report pinpoints examples of schools that have revamped the student learning experience, such as Washington, DC’s School Without Walls, which has infused project-based learning into the standard high school experience.

The report offers principles that should guide how schooling is redesigned: (1) Provide individualized approaches to fostering knowledge and skills that are more effective than one-size-fits-all approaches; (2) Offer learning experiences rooted outside the school walls that deliver valuable knowledge, skills and civic values that enable young people to transition to a complex adult world; (3) Cultivate diverse talents for the nation’s heterogeneous youths, which is critical to creating an interesting and enriching culture; (4) Provide a way for institutions to open up and adapt to young people, rather than leaving it to the young people to make their way—or not.

*It Takes a Whole Society* is available at <http://bit.ly/H4vPPu>.

***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; Kenya Downs, communications associate; 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>.