



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



ONE FISCAL CLIFF DOWN, THREE MORE TO GO?: Congress Reaches Agreement on Fiscal Cliff; Decisions Still Loom on Sequestration, Debt Ceiling, and Fiscal Year 2013 Spending

On January 1, the U.S. Congress passed legislation to extend tax cuts for most Americans and temporarily avert the so-called “fiscal cliff” that was scheduled to go into effect on January 2, 2013. At the same time, however, it merely kicked the can down the road on “sequestration,” postponing until March 1 the billions of dollars in automatic spending cuts to the military and numerous domestic agencies, including the U.S. Department of Education.

Of concern to education advocates, these spending cuts would reduce federal funding for the U.S. Department of Education in Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 by approximately 8.2 percent, or \$4.1 billion, according to a [report from the Office of Management and Budget \(OMB\)](#). Among individual programs, an 8.2 percent reduction in funding would mean a \$1.2 billion cut to Title I in FY 2013, a \$973 million cut to special education, and a \$146 million cut to career and technical education. The one silver lining is that these cuts would not affect school districts until the 2013–14 school year, giving schools and districts time to develop plans to absorb the cuts.

By postponing the spending cuts until March 1, it is hoped that Congress will be able to reach a compromise to avoid them. Hopefully recent history is not an indicator since Congress had more than a year to avoid the fiscal cliff scheduled for January 2.

Further complicating matters are two other looming “cliffs.” First, the FY 2013 continuing resolution—the temporary mechanism that Congress enacted to fund the federal government—is scheduled to expire on March 27. Second, the federal government is expected in February or March to reach the “debt limit,” the total amount of money that the U.S. government is authorized to borrow to meet its existing legal obligations.

“We were trying to address the fiscal cliff and we spawned three more cliffs,” **Representative Xavier Becerra (D-CA)** told CQ.com. “Now, we’ve got to do the tough stuff.”

Already both parties are digging in their heels. **House of Representatives Speaker John Boehner (R-OH)** said that any increase in the debt limit must be accompanied by equal amounts in cuts to federal spending.

Meanwhile, President Obama seems unwilling to negotiate. “I will not have another debate with this Congress over whether or not they should pay the bills that they’ve already racked up through the laws that they passed,” [he said earlier this month](#). “Let me repeat: We can’t not pay

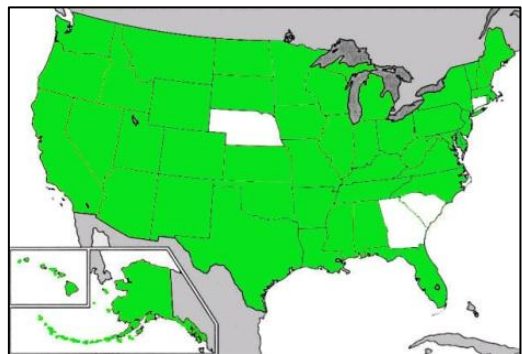
bills that we've already incurred. If Congress refuses to give the United States government the ability to pay these bills on time, the consequences for the entire global economy would be catastrophic—far worse than the impact of a fiscal cliff.”



DIGITAL LEARNING DAY: Less than One Month Until Students, Teachers, and Administrators Nationwide Gather to Explore How Digital Learning Is Changing Education; Nearly 18,000 Teachers, Forty-Six States, and DC Already Engaged

With less than one month until the second annual national Digital Learning Day on February 6, the Alliance for Excellent Education released initial details of the organization's national effort to promote digital learning and spotlight successful instructional technology practice in the classroom.

To date, forty-six states and the District of Columbia, and nearly 18,000 teachers have already signed up to participate in digital learning activities throughout the day and beyond. ([States participating in Digital Learning Day](#) appear in green in the map to the right.)



“Digital Learning Day is less than one month away, but the number of teachers who have signed up to participate is already ahead of last year’s final tally—showing evidence of the increasing enthusiasm and momentum around digital learning,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia.**

Digital Learning Day is a national campaign focused on improving teaching and learning by effectively using technology that began in 2011. In addition to the national Digital Town Hall—the centerpiece of Digital Learning Day—this year’s activities will offer multiple learning and professional development opportunities that will support teachers, introduce innovative digital learning strategies, and provide interactive lesson plans that will be used across the country.

“Digital Learning Day emphasizes empowerment,” said Wise. “Providing the technological tools to empower teachers creates a more collaborative, supportive, and transparent school culture. Quality teaching joined with effective technology can empower students to be life-long learners and producers of content and information by ensuring that they are ready for college and a career. And, finally, planning effectively for the inevitable shift to digital content and blended learning empowers education and political leaders to make decisions that put students first and support teachers.”

To celebrate Digital Learning Day, states and school districts are planning numerous activities to promote the use of digital learning, including highlighting promising practices within and among states, showcasing student work through digital learning, and conducting lesson plan contests for teachers.

In Washington, DC, the Alliance has planned a day full of events to celebrate Digital Learning Day on February 6, 2013. In the morning, more than 100 educators from Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, DC will gather to observe lesson plans and demonstrations of interactive digital learning content and instructional strategies that utilize digital learning in the classroom. Geared toward educators and others wanting to know more about specific approaches to digital learning, these hands-on teaching and learning sessions will be led by expert teachers from across the country and will be posted online for use by teachers nationwide. Areas of focus for these instructional lessons include

- digital content areas for math, science, civics/social studies, and English language arts;
- problem-based learning;
- flipping the classroom—using time more efficiently by having students watch videos of lectures as homework and freeing up classroom time for more individualized, robust, and engaging instruction;
- mobile learning and online tools to support blended and face-to-face instruction; and
- new trends in assessment, including digital portfolios and instant feedback using ongoing, informal “quizzes” to improve each student’s cognition.

In the afternoon, the Alliance will hold a **Digital Town Hall from 1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. (ET)**, which will focus on how great teaching combined with effective technology makes a positive impact on improving America’s schools, particularly those that serve high-risk and high-poverty populations. Teachers, students, schools, and districts that will be profiled for implementing digital learning in innovative and successful ways, include

- Dysart Unified School District (Surprise, AZ and El Mirage, AZ);
- Quakertown Community School District (Quakertown, PA); and
- Cajon Valley Union School District (El Cajon, CA).

Last year, more than 40,000 people watched this digital event live and more than 3,500 educators participated in the live chat to share resources and best practices. Individuals interested in watching the live simulcast of the Digital Town Hall can register at <http://digitallearningday.eventbrite.com/>.

To learn more about Digital Learning Day, or to see ideas about how students, parents, administrators, and others can participate, visit <http://www.DigitalLearningDay.org>.



REPAIRING A BROKEN SYSTEM: Federal Student Aid System Must Be Fixed to Meet Demands of Twenty-First-Century Economy, New Alliance Report Finds

The federal student financial aid system, originally designed to increase access to higher education, must undergo a transformation to help more students earn a higher education degree or certificate and meet the increased demands of the twenty-first-century economy.

A new Alliance for Excellent Education report, *Repairing a Broken System: Fixing Federal Student Aid*, outlines a comprehensive approach for revamping the student aid system into one

that better supports students and institutions of higher education (IHEs) and focuses on access *and* completion. (To watch the [video](#) that accompanies the report, click on the image below).

“Every day, the American economy ups the ante; today, students need some form of postsecondary education to compete for good jobs,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “For the good of the students—and the future of the American economy—the nation must go ‘all-in’ to repair the federal student financial aid system to ensure that students not only *enter* higher education but *emerge* with a postsecondary credential.”



The report proposes several policy and administrative changes to the existing federal student aid programs. These recommendations include (1) creating institutional supports and accountability; (2) simplifying the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the entire student aid system; (3) focusing student aid on the highest-need students; and (4) providing support for middle-class families.

Among the Alliance’s specific proposals is an emphasis on focusing federal student aid on students with the highest financial need and reducing the number of questions on the FAFSA required to determine need for federal student aid. Additionally, the report proposes creating a public reference chart that allows students and families to determine their Pell Grant award amount using adjusted gross income, family size, and dependency status. To be eligible for federal student aid, a student would need to enroll at least half time in an IHE.

Repairing a Broken System also calls on increased accountability for IHEs. To enable students and parents to make informed choices about where to attend school, the Alliance recommends that IHEs participating in federal student aid programs publicly report graduation rates for student aid recipients versus the school population at large. IHEs should also be required to inquire and report the reasons students drop below half-time status or withdraw, as well as maintain comparable graduation rates based on institution type.

Middle-class families would also be supported under the Alliance’s recommended federal student aid reforms. By combining the two current higher education tax credits with an added allowance for a portion of the cost of attendance at an IHE, the financial burden placed on families supporting degree-seekers would be lessened.

“The time for a federal student aid system arranged solely around access has passed; the time for a system that delivers a return on investment in the form of college completion is now,” Wise said. “The Alliance urges policymakers to act swiftly in implementing necessary federal student aid reforms.”

Read the full report at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/RepairingBrokenSystem.pdf>.



TRENDS IN INTERNATIONAL MATH AND SCIENCE SCORES: U.S. Eighth Graders Ranked in Top Ten on International Math and Science Tests

American eighth-grade students ranked ninth and tenth (out of thirty-eight) in math and science, respectively, compared to students in other countries on the 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), while fourth graders were eleventh and seventh (out of forty-five). Released in December 2012, the results from the TIMSS suggest the degree to which students have learned mathematics and science concepts and skills likely to have been taught in school.

The average math score among American eighth graders was 509, an increase of 1 point since the last assessment in 2007, and higher than the international average (500). The Republic of Korea posted the highest average score (613), followed by Singapore (611), and Chinese Taipei (609). In science, American eighth graders posted an average score of 525, an increase of 5 points since 2007, and higher than the international average (500). Singapore had the highest average score (590), followed by Chinese Taipei (564), and the Republic of Korea (560). The countries with the highest average scores in eighth-grade math and eighth-grade science appear in the table below.

Eighth-Grade Math Scores		Eighth-Grade Science Scores	
Country	Average Score	Country	Average Score
Republic of Korea	613	Singapore	590
Singapore	611	Chinese Taipei	564
Chinese Taipei	609	Republic of Korea	560
Hong Kong	586	Japan	558
Japan	570	Finland	552
Russian Federation	539	Slovenia	543
Israel	516	Russian Federation	542
Finland	514	Hong Kong	535
United States	509	England	533
England	507	United States	525

When broken down by race and ethnicity, the TIMSS reveals large achievement gaps between student subgroups. Among eighth graders, Asian students posted the highest average score in math (568), followed by white (530), multiracial (513), Hispanic (485), and black students (465). In science, Asian eighth graders again ranked first (556), followed by white (553), multiracial (534), Hispanic (493), and black students (470).

A number of U.S. states participated in the test as well. In eighth-grade math, Massachusetts (561), Minnesota (545), North Carolina (537), Indiana (522), Colorado (518), Connecticut (518), and Florida (513) all posted average scores higher than the international average (500), while California (493) and Alabama (466) posted scores below it. The same was true in eighth-grade science: Massachusetts (567), Minnesota (553), Colorado (542), Indiana (533), Connecticut (532), North Carolina (532), and Florida (530) posted scores higher than the international average (500), while California (499) and Alabama (485) posted scores below it.

“It is rewarding to see that students in highly-diverse states like Florida, Massachusetts, and North Carolina excelled internationally in a number of subject areas, showing that demography is

not destiny in our schools,” [said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan](#). “State and local policy matter and can have a powerful influence in advancing or slowing educational progress. These new assessments put to rest the myth that America’s schools cannot be among the world’s top-performing school systems. In fact, eighth graders in Massachusetts performed below only one country in the world in science, Singapore.”

The complete results are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2013009>.

U.S. Fourth Graders Ranked Sixth on International Reading Assessment

U.S. fourth graders ranked sixth out of forty-five participating countries on the 2011 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which was released in December 2012. The PIRLS measures student performance on a combined reading literacy scale, as well as two subscales of purposes of reading: reading for literary experience and reading to acquire and use information.

The U.S. average score (556) was 16 points higher than its average score on the previous assessment in 2006 and higher than the international average (500). As shown in the table to the right, Hong Kong posted the highest average score (571), followed by the Russian Federation (568) and Finland (568).

Among student subgroups, Asian students posted the highest average score (588), followed by multiracial (578), white (575), Hispanic (532), and black students (522). The results also show that students attending schools where less than 10 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch have an average score of 605, compared to the average score of 520 for schools with a student population with 75 percent or more of these students.

The complete results are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013010.pdf>.

Country	Average Score
Hong Kong	571
Russian Federation	568
Finland	568
Singapore	567
Northern Ireland	558
United States	556
Denmark	554
Croatia	553
Chinese Taipei	553
Ireland	552
England	552



STATE OF THE STATES: Nation’s Governors Focus on Education as State of the State Addresses Begin

Saying that improving education goes “hand-in-hand” with job creation, **Delaware Governor Jack Markell (D)** delivered the National Governors Association’s (NGA) first-ever [“State of the States” address](#) on January 9 in Washington, DC. Markell, who is the 2012–13 NGA chairperson, said state economies are slowly recovering from the economic downturn and are only now returning to the revenues they collected in 2008.

Pointing to efforts such as the Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted in forty-six states, and Race to the Top, Markell said governors are leading efforts to “ensure that students—regardless of race, income, disability, or zip code—receive a world-class public education to succeed in college, careers, or life.” He said having consistently high standards across states “provide teachers, parents, and students with a set of clear expectations that everyone can work toward together.”

Markell said the uncertainties from Washington, DC regarding looming federal spending cuts, the impending breach of the debt limit, and fundamental entitlement and tax reform must be

resolved in order for states to make fully informed fiscal plans to address the needs of their citizens.

“As much as we do in our states, our economies are tightly linked to the national economy,” Markell said. “As a result, our states’ prosperity depends, in no small measure, on the ability of our public servants in Washington to come to terms on a path forward. The uncertainty from Washington and the reality of shrinking federal support hurts both our economies and our budgets.”

Connecticut: Malloy Focuses on Sandy Hook Elementary; Discusses Turnaround Plan for State’s Underperforming Schools

In his [state of the state address on January 9](#), **Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy (D)** talked about the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy and pledged to improve response to those with mental health needs and “do everything in our power to ensure that Connecticut never again suffers such a loss . . . When it comes to preventing future acts of violence in our schools, let me say this: more guns are not the answer,” Malloy said. “Freedom is not a handgun on the hip of every teacher, and security should not mean a guard posted outside every classroom.”

Malloy also talked about the newly created “Commissioner’s Network,” which focuses on the state’s underperforming schools. Four schools—High School in the Community (New Haven); James J. Curiale School, a K–8 school in Bridgeport; John B. Stanton School, a pre-K–5 school in Norwich; and Thirman Milner School, a pre-K–7 school in Hartford—have already volunteered to be in the program and are receiving intensive intervention, increased instruction time, and improved collaboration among teachers and administrators.

New York: Cuomo Offers Flurry of Education Proposals

Saying New York’s “one-two punch is jobs and education,” **New York Governor Andrew Cuomo (D)** used his [state of the state address on January 9](#) to call for extended learning time, a pay-for-performance model for colleges, expanded access to early education, and continued focus on attracting and incentivizing the best teachers.

Noting that American children, on average, spend fewer days in schools than their counterparts in Korea and Canada, Cuomo said the state would pay 100 percent of the additional cost to extend the school day beyond 3:00 p.m., start the school day earlier, or have a longer school year. Cuomo also called for an overhaul to the teacher training and certification process, including a “bar exam type test” that every person must pass to become a teacher.

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; Cyndi Waite; and Kate Bradley.

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>.