



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



CONGRESSIONAL BUDGET RESOLUTIONS: U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives Adopt Very Different Budget Plans, Likely Leading to Difficult Negotiations During Appropriations Process; Obama to Release Budget on April 10

The congressional budget resolution is a nonbinding spending blueprint that sets monetary limits for the spending and tax legislation that the U.S. Congress will consider for the rest of the year. It does not require presidential approval and only the grand total of the discretionary spending laid out in the final budget resolution is binding on the appropriations committees. Nonetheless, the congressional budget resolution is an important step in the budgeting process because it provides guidance to the chairmen of the appropriations committees on how to divide resources among various federal departments and agencies, and sets the stage for the twelve annual appropriations bills that must be passed by Congress and signed by the president.

Last month, the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate passed separate congressional budget resolutions that could hardly be more different. The House version, sponsored by **House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI)**, would reduce spending by \$4.6 trillion by cutting domestic programs, repealing “Obamacare,” overhauling the tax code, and balancing the budget by 2023. It would limit domestic discretionary spending to \$414 billion in Fiscal Year (FY) 2014—a cut of \$50 billion more than the amount established by the sequester. And by setting defense discretionary spending at \$552 billion in FY 2014, it would transfer the sequester’s impact on military spending to domestic spending.

“We are offering a responsible, balanced budget,” [Ryan said](#). “It recognizes that if we can’t get a handle on our out-of-control debt, we will lose control of our future. We cut wasteful spending and balance the budget. This plan recognizes that concern for the poor is not measured by how much money we spend in Washington, but instead how many people we help get out of poverty. We reform antipoverty programs so they work. We help strengthen communities and families.”

The Senate version, sponsored by **Senate Budget Committee Chairwoman Patty Murray (D-WA)**, would replace the sequester with a combination of tax increases and spending cuts while increasing spending on infrastructure and worker-training programs by \$100 billion over ten years. To pay for these increases, the Senate version directs the Senate Finance Committee to write legislation increasing tax revenue by \$975 billion over the next ten years.

“The Senate budget takes the balanced and responsible approach to tackling our fiscal and economic challenges that the vast majority of families across the country support,” [Murray said](#). “This budget replaces sequestration in a balanced way to protect jobs and the economy. It invests in broad-based economic growth and job-creation. It tackles our deficit and debt responsibly

through an equal mix of spending cuts and new revenue raised by closing tax loopholes and ending wasteful deductions that benefit the wealthiest Americans and biggest corporations. And it keeps the promises we've made to our seniors, families, and communities.”

It is unlikely that the House and Senate will come to an agreement on these two very different budget blueprints, setting up a continued battle regarding taxes and spending over the coming year and previewing what could be difficult negotiations over final appropriations bills, including funding for the U.S. Department of Education.

On Wednesday, April 10, President Obama will put forth his budget for FY 2014. Originally expected in February, Obama's budget was delayed as the president and Congress worked through the sequester and delayed appropriations for FY 2013.



MIDDLE CLASS OR MIDDLE OF THE PACK?: New OECD Test Allows Individual U.S. High Schools to Compare Their Students to World's Highest-Performing Nations

A large percentage of American middle-class high schools have not kept pace with countries like Singapore, Finland, Korea, and Germany that have raised standards, invested in teachers, and lifted their overall performance, according to a new report from America Achieves. The report, *Middle Class or Middle of the Pack?: What Can We Learn When Benchmarking U.S. Schools Against the World's Best?*, finds that middle-class American fifteen-year-olds are “significantly” outperformed by their peers in twenty-four countries in math and fifteen countries in science based on a pilot study involving 105 American high schools that administered a new test known as the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Test for Schools (based on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)). The test measures students' abilities to apply their knowledge to solve real-world problems, the kinds of deeper learning necessary to succeed in college and the workplace.

“In a global economy, the benchmark for educational success is no longer progress by state standards alone, but the best performing education systems internationally,” [said Andreas Schleicher, special advisor on education policy to the OECD's secretary-general and deputy director for education.](#) “With this new OECD Test, schools now have the tools to see themselves in the light of what the world's educational leaders show can be achieved.”

Although middle-class high schools as a whole trail their international competitors, the report identifies several U.S. schools that are global leaders, including some that primarily serve low-income students. For example, North Star Academy, a nonselective, predominantly low-income school in Newark, New Jersey, cracked the world's top ten by outperforming all but the average of nine countries in reading.

In addition, three nonselective high schools in Fairfax, Virginia, outperformed the averages of virtually every other country in the world. While two of these schools serve a more affluent population, the third—Woodson High School—is “much more solidly middle class,” the report notes. As shown in the table below, Woodson's students outperformed students in every country

and region in the world in reading except Shanghai-China. “In other words, it’s from the middle of the middle class, but its performance is world class,” the report says.

The report also highlights BASIS Tucson North, a nonselective, open-enrollment charter school that the report calls economically modest and diverse, with a student body that is 52 percent Caucasian, 25 percent black and Hispanic, and 19 percent Asian. As shown in the table to the right, BASIS Tucson North outperformed the averages of every other nation in the world—including Shanghai-China—in reading. The school also topped the international chart in math and science.

COUNT	NAME	MEAN SCORE
	BASIS TUCSON	610
1	SHANGHAI-CHINA	556
	WOODSON HS, FAIRFAX	550
2	KOREA	539
3	FINLAND	536
4	HONG KONG-CHINA	553
5	SINGAPORE	526

“This study highlights the great news that we can learn from individual U.S. schools that are leading the world in educational performance,” said **Jon Schnur, executive chairman of America Achieves**. “But this report also shows a crucial need for better education for all students including not only low-income communities but middle class communities as well.”

Each of the 105 high schools that participated in the pilot program received a lengthy report from the OECD showing results in terms of performance, students’ average backgrounds, and the learning environment at school. The report also includes international examples that offer strategies for improvement, which have yielded results in other education systems, such as high expectations, teacher quality, the importance of student engagement, and the need to create a supportive learning environment at the school. In addition to comparing individual schools with PISA results from the United States and other countries, a participating school can compare its students to students in both the top-performing region (Shanghai-China) and lowest-performing country (Mexico) in the OECD.

“These first 105 high schools were courageous to pioneer this international exam,” [said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia](#). “While they knew they might get low scores, they wanted the valuable information to improve learning for their students. All students will be measured at some point. Schools can either take the OECD school-based test now to see how their students compete, or wait until their students enter the workforce and have market forces tell them how they stack up. Every community should encourage its schools to take advantage of this opportunity.”

Starting in the fall of 2013, individual schools can take the OECD Test for Schools. In order to get a statistically sound sample, participating schools need to involve approximately seventy-five of their fifteen-year-old students. Interested schools and districts can sign up to participate or get more information at <http://www.americaachieves.org> or <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-basedtestforschools/>.

Middle Class or Middle of the Pack? is available at <http://www.americaachieves.org/docs/OECD/Middle-Class-Or-Middle-Of-Pack.pdf>.



TRANSFORMING ASSESSMENT: Gordon Commission Offers Recommendations for Fundamentally Reconceptualizing Purposes of Educational Assessments

The Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education (the Gordon Commission) recently issued a public policy statement based on its two-plus years of work designed to “stimulate a productive national conversation about assessment and its relationship to teaching and learning.”

The statement notes that now is a “remarkable opportunity to reconceptualize the purposes of educational assessments” based on several factors, including adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in mathematics and English language arts; development of the Next Generation Science Standards, and work focused on developing assessments aligned to the CCSS by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC).

“These developments have heightened awareness among educators and state and federal policymakers of the critical relationships among more rigorous standards, curriculum, instruction, and appropriate assessment, and have created an opportunity to address issues of long standing,” the statement notes.

Issues raised in the statement include the need for the nation’s leaders to (1) recognize that assessments can serve multiple purposes and (2) invest in the development of new types of assessments to accomplish these different purposes. The statement offers two main purposes of assessment: “assessment *of* learning,” which measures what students can demonstrate as a result of instruction, and “assessment *for* learning,” which is designed for adjusting and improving instruction.

Because teachers and students will “take their cues” from high-stake tests and will try to score well on them, it is “critical,” the statement says, that the tests best represent the kind of learning students will need to thrive after high school graduation. Simply changing the nature and quality of tests, however, will not be enough, the statement notes. An equal or greater investment must be made in developing tools that integrate assessment and classroom instruction that reflect what is known about student learning and changes in society, particularly the advent of digital technology.

“The globalization of the economy, advancements in technology, the development of the internet, and the explosion of social media and other communication platforms have changed the nature of what it means to be well-educated and competent in the twenty-first century,” the statement reads. “New assessments—both external and internal to classroom use—must fit squarely into this landscape of the future, both signaling what is important and helping learners know they are making progress toward productive citizenry.”

Digital technologies hold promise for bringing about the changes the Gordon Commission would like to see and can be used to access information, create simulations, and enable collaboration. They can also measure “noncognitive” factors, such as persistence and creativity.

Recognizing the role that policymakers will play in the future of assessment, the public policy statement includes three recommendations directed at policymakers:

- States should create a council on educational assessments, modeled on the Education Commission of the States, to monitor how well assessments are working and recommend improvements. The council would evaluate the effects of PARCC and SBAC on teaching and learning, conduct research on changes in assessments, and inform states as they make purchasing decisions. The council would also mount a public information campaign to explain the need for better assessment, examine issues of equity, and study policies to ensure the privacy of assessment data.
- President Obama and the U.S. Congress should encourage states to experiment with different methods of assessment and accountability and use the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to create incentives for new forms of assessment, such as performance tasks.
- Federal agencies and the philanthropic community should launch a ten-year effort to strengthen the capacity of assessments to measure the full range of competencies students need to develop. Additionally, the government and private funders should expand the number of scholars dedicated to developing expertise in assessment.

Created by the Educational Testing Service in January 2011, the Gordon Commission—chaired by **Edmund W. Gordon, professor emeritus at Yale and Columbia Universities**—is charged with considering the nature and content of American education during the twenty-first century and how assessment can be used to advance that vision. It consists of thirty members, including **Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise**. More information on the Gordon Commission and its work is available at <http://www.gordoncommission.org/>.

The complete public policy statement is available at http://www.gordoncommission.org/rsc/pdfs/gordon_commission_public_policy_report.pdf.



DEVELOPING ASSESSMENTS OF DEEPER LEARNING: New Report Examines Costs of Current Students Tests, Calls for Exams More Closely Aligned with College and a Career

School districts and states must find affordable and feasible ways to improve student assessments so that they measure high-level skills and knowledge, a new report from the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education finds. The report, *Developing Assessments of Deeper Learning: The Costs and Benefits of Using Tests that Help Students Learn*, provides data on what states and districts currently spend on tests; examines the failings of current multiple-choice tests; and analyzes the costs and opportunities of creating, implementing, and scoring assessments that ensure students are equipped with twenty-first-century competencies.

In order to measure “deeper learning” competencies—higher-order skills that students need to become ready for college and a career—the United States needs higher-quality assessments that are more open-ended and less reliant on inexpensive multiple-choice exams, the report notes.

“Although they may appear low in costs, today’s testing programs are generally not organized to produce the benefits of deeper student learning found in high-performing countries,” the report reads. “Instead, we have a set of fragmented, disjointed efforts, unable to measure the most important learning goals, and not useful to teachers’ efforts to understand how their students think and what could be done to support their success.”

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—adopted by forty-six states and the District of Columbia—and the new assessments being created to accompany them, aim to improve teaching and learning by developing students’ abilities to think critically, analyze evidence, synthesize information, and communicate. Currently two state-level consortia, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, are developing assessments that will measure the high-level skills expected of students under the CCSS. The report recommends that the United States draw from the work of these consortia to improve assessments.

The report identifies three challenges facing the implementation of new assessments: funding, time, and traditions. In the current fiscal climate, states may be hesitant to develop costly assessments that increase per-pupil spending. According to the report, many states budget approximately \$20 per pupil for testing in math and reading—an amount equal to roughly two-tenths of 1 percent (.002) of average per-pupil spending on K–12 education, forcing states to rely on inexpensive multiple-choice tests.

“High-quality assessments have tended to cost more than lower-quality assessments, primarily because performance tasks and essays often require human scoring, whereas low-level skills can be measured with multiple-choice questions that are cheap to score,” the report explains. “From a cost-benefit perspective, this approach is penny wise and pound foolish. Constraining our assessments to instruments that can only measure low-level learning, and then tying decision making that will drive virtually all instructional efforts to what they measure, is a recipe for low-quality schooling.”

One way that states can mitigate assessment costs is through adopting digital technology in the form of online testing, the report notes. Even then, a high-quality test will always be more expensive, but the benefits of higher-quality assessments outweigh the costs, the report finds.

Although price tags on multiple-choice exams are low, the report argues that the resources currently spent on student testing—including teachers’ time preparing students to take them—could support much higher quality assessments, including performance tasks that include critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Because of current testing practices, students often miss out on instruction in topics and subjects that are untested, including writing, oral communications, extended problem solving, research, and investigation—all skills needed to succeed in college and a career. “The tangible expenditures on testing, as well as the costs to instruction, have not been considered in discussions of what kinds of assessment might be affordable as learning goals change,” the report notes.

Although the benefits of high-quality assessments are numerous, states and school districts need to see them as affordable and feasible before the nation can reap the rewards, the report notes. To do this, the report recommends that states and schools

- develop a vision of a high-quality assessment system, including how it can operate to strengthen learning;
- take advantage of cost savings associated with consortia and productive uses of technology;
- involve teachers in scoring assessments in ways that also support teacher learning and improved instruction; and
- be strategic about combining state and local resources to make sound, coherent investments in high-quality assessments.

“The question for policymakers has shifted from, ‘Can we afford assessments of deeper learning?’ to, ‘Can the United States afford not to have such high-quality assessments?’” the report asks in its conclusion. “The answer is that assessments of deeper learning are needed to provide the impetus for students to develop skills for the knowledge economy, as a prerequisite for global competitiveness, and for the long-term well-being of the nation.”

The complete report is available at <http://stanford.io/144hxMe>.

WEBINAR VIDEO AVAILABLE: *Developing Assessments of Deeper Learning*

On March 27, the Alliance for Excellent Education held a webinar on *Developing Assessments of Deeper Learning: The Costs and Benefits of Using Tests that Help Students Learn*, a new report from the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE).

During the webinar, report coauthor **Linda Darling-Hammond, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University and director of SCOPE**, explained the study and its findings. **Gene Wilhoit, partner with Student Achievement Partners** and **Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association**, discussed the report’s implications for state policy. **Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise** moderated the discussion.



PowerPoint slides and archived video from the webinar are available at <http://media.all4ed.org/webinar-mar-27-2013>.

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a free 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 www.all4ed.org; follow the Alliance on Twitter (www.twitter.com/all4ed); Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed); and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).