



ALLIANCE FOR  
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **EDUCATION FUNDING BILL PASSES SENATE: Bill Provides Smallest Increase for Education in Eight Years**

After successfully fighting back most Democratic amendments to add more money for education, the Senate passed a Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations bill that would provide only a 5 percent increase over last year. This increase is the smallest percentage increase for education in eight years, despite the fact that the Senate passed amendments that added funding for special education and dropout prevention. An amendment by **Sen. Chris Dodd (D-CT)** added \$1.2 billion for special education to the \$1 billion already included in the bill. An amendment by **Sens. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM)** and **Harry Reid (D-NV)** restored half of the already miniscule \$10.9 million that was provided for dropout prevention last year.

All other amendments, including a \$6.1 billion increase for Title I, were defeated on largely partisan votes before the Senate unanimously approved the final bill by a 94 to 0 vote. The bill will now go to conference where it faces an uncertain future because of a controversial Department of Labor issue on overtime pay.

The largest of the proposed Democratic amendments, a \$6.1 billion increase for Title I programs, was defeated 44 to 51. The amendment, offered by **Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-WV)**, would have raised funding for Title I to \$18.5 billion, the amount Congress and the President agreed to when the *No Child Left Behind Act* was signed into law.

During the week and a half debate on the bill, the Senate also defeated amendments that would have increased funding for rural schools, school repair and renovation, library programs, and afterschool programs. An amendment by **Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-MA)** that would have increased the maximum Pell Grant award by \$450 to \$4,500 and would have provided \$2.2 billion for higher education programs was defeated 46 to 49. For the most part, the amendments were decided on straight party-line votes, with Democrats voting for the increases and Republicans voting against.

### **Pay for Overtime Could Result in a Veto of the Whole Bill**

In addition to education funding, another contentious issue during consideration of the Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations bill was a proposal by the Bush administration to expand overtime coverage to low-income workers, but restrict it for many white-collar and other middle-income employees. Democrats immediately attacked the proposal, saying it would eliminate overtime coverage for approximately 8 million workers. For its part, the Labor Department

## Education Funding Bill Passes Senate

(Continued from p. 1)

contends that about 644,000 workers would be affected. After the House allowed the President to restrict overtime pay, the Senate went in the other direction and, as part of the Labor-HHS-Education spending bill, passed a provision that blocks President's proposal.

The differences between the two versions will have to be worked out in conference committee among House and Senate members. The President has weighed in strongly and has said he will veto the bill if it maintains the Senate language. To override the veto, both chambers would need a two-thirds vote, which would likely prove difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Educators will have to watch from the sidelines as this issue is played out.



### HOUSE PASSES \$10 MILLION DC VOUCHER PROGRAM: Voucher Opponents Criticize Vote Timing, Set Sights on Senate Debate

The House passed a \$10 million private school tuition grant program—vouchers—for Washington, D.C. students. The program is expected to benefit approximately 1,300 of 68,000 students in the school system. Voucher opponents took issue with the extremely close 209-208 vote and argued that several likely “no” voters were unable to be present because of the Democratic presidential debate in Baltimore that night. They have pinned their hopes on the bill's defeat in the Senate.

The five-year program will provide scholarships of up to \$7,500 for students who come from families with incomes at or below 185 percent of the poverty rate (approximately \$34,000 for a family of four). Students who receive scholarships would be randomly selected with priority given to students who attend schools deemed “in need of improvement” according to *No Child Left Behind*.

The voucher program is included in the D.C. Appropriations bill and is part of a \$40 million package of new funding for D.C. public schools and public charter schools. Supporters, such as the **District's Mayor Anthony Williams (D)** and **Peggy Cooper Cafritz, president of the D.C. Board of Education**, argue that the program will not take any money from public or charter schools in Washington, D.C. They also say that because the program is included in the D.C. Appropriations bill, it will not divert any money from federal education programs that are funded by the Labor-HHS-Education spending bill.

In a letter to the *Washington Post* in support of the program, Mayor Williams implored Congress to view the issue as a local, not national, decision. “We are not advocating a national voucher policy. We, as local leaders, are simply imploring Congress to embrace our efforts to help our long-neglected student population with every available tool. . . . This is a welcome partnership between the District and Congress. The discussion should not be burdened with agendas and ideologies unrelated to the best interests of the schoolchildren in our city.”

The Senate bill, as approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee, includes \$13 million for the voucher program. In committee, **Sens. Robert C. Byrd (D-WV)** and **Dianne Feinstein (D-CA)** crossed party lines to support the program while **Sen. Arlen Specter (R-PA)** was the only Republican who voted against it. The bill, not expected to reach the Senate floor for at least a week or two, will likely face a difficult passage. Opponents have several ways to try to defeat the bill, including a filibuster, which requires 60 votes to overcome. However, if the Republican leadership were to roll the D.C. appropriations bill into an omnibus spending package with one or two other appropriations bills, defeat of the voucher program would prove more difficult.

### **NCLB Transfer Options Are Left Behind: Few Students Seek Transfer**

As Congress continues its debate on the DC School Choice program, students around the country are opting to stay in their neighborhood schools, even if they are poor-performing schools. Recent reports from Chicago and Rhode Island appear to support a general nationwide trend in which few students are opting to transfer from schools in need of improvement. As schools opened in the two states, school officials discovered that, of the handful of students who did transfer, most did so because of issues unrelated to school performance, such as location or child-care concerns.

Under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, Chicago was required to establish a lottery for the 270,000 students who were eligible for transfers and to inform parents of this option. In the end, school officials received only 19,246 replies indicating a desire to enter the lottery. After the 1,097 lottery winners were selected, only 481 decided to take advantage of their ticket and transfer to a better-performing school.

School officials in Rhode Island found very similar results. In August, the Rhode Island Department of Education announced that 27 public schools were in need of improvement. Students attending these schools had an option to transfer to another school in the district. The reaction was, at best, lukewarm. According to *The Providence Journal*, only six of 375 families from Warwick, R.I., who were invited to a meeting on school choice actually came. Of those six, only two families signed up for a transfer.

The results across the state were no different. In Central Falls, 11 parents asked for a transfer. In Woonsocket, a total of four families from two elementary schools have taken advantage of the transfer options. In fact, according to one Rhode Island superintendent, even when families choose to move their children, academics rarely plays a role. “When you look at the reasons why parents want transfers, it’s because of child-care issues or because they live closer to one school than another,” Schools Superintendent Maureen Chevrette told *The Providence Journal*. “It’s very seldom because they like this school more than that one.”

“Most Rhode Island Parents Choose to Ignore School Choice”:

[http://www.projo.com/education/content/projo\\_20030906\\_ch06x.cd372.html](http://www.projo.com/education/content/projo_20030906_ch06x.cd372.html)



## ALABAMA VOTERS DEFEAT TAX INCREASE FOR EDUCATION

Over the last several months, **Alabama Gov. Bob Riley (R)** has traveled throughout the state to promote his \$1.2 billion tax increase. He promoted it as a way not only resolve the state's fiscal crisis, but also to shift the tax burden from the poor to the rich, and to improve public education in Alabama. As voters traveled to the polls last week, it was apparent that the governor's months of campaigning could not overcome decades of distrust of the state legislature. Expensive ad campaigns from the powerful national anti-tax lobby also played a large part in the campaign. When the smoke cleared, Gov. Riley's tax proposal was defeated by a 67 to 33 percent margin, with those standing to benefit the most among the strongest opponents.

Before becoming governor in January 2003, Bob Riley served six years in the U.S. House of Representatives during which he never voted for a tax increase. So, why the sudden change of heart? "I'm tired of Alabama being first in things that are bad and last in things that are good," the *Washington Post* quoted Riley as saying at an Alabama Rotary Club meeting.

Had the governor's plan passed, Alabama teachers would have benefited most. Riley proposed lengthening the school year from 175 to 180 days over the next five years, providing teachers with a great deal more time for planning and collaboration. In addition, the plan would have provided bonuses to teachers who agreed to teach in high-need areas. It would also have invested more money in professional development for teachers. For students, Riley's plan would have established merit-based college scholarships to two- and four-year colleges among students who achieve a qualifying score on the ACT.

To pay for these spending increases, Riley sought to raise the tax burden on wealthier individuals while easing the amount low-income families would have to pay. For starters, the plan would have raised the tax threshold at which individuals owe income tax from \$4,600 to about \$20,000 over the course of seven years. At the same time, he would have increased the income tax rate from 5 to 6 percent for individuals earning above \$75,000 and \$150,000 for married couples. He also sought to increase property taxes on homes, timberland, and farmland—although he did include some protections for smaller farms. Alabama now has one of the lowest property tax rates in the country. Under the current tax code, wealthier citizens pay an effective tax rate of 3 percent while the poorest pay 12 percent.

Alabama's state tax code is written into its constitution and any changes require a constitutional amendment. The tax proposal therefore had to go before Alabama's voters. From the outset Riley faced an uphill battle to overcome deep cynicism and mistrust of a state government that seemed to still operate under the "good ole boy" system of pork and patronage. Throughout his tour of the state, Riley attempted to explain the accountability provisions that accompanied the tax package. "There's no way the legislature could ever do anything else with that money," he told *Education Week*. "But when the opposition has TV ads saying, 'It's not going to education,' then it clouds it."

Opposition radio and television ads, combined with decades of voter distrust, proved too much to overcome. Groups such as Americans for Tax Reform, Citizens for a Sound Economy, and the

Family Research Council actively campaigned against the tax increase. After the outcome became known, they portrayed the defeat as a warning to politicians across the country who are eyeing tax receipts as a way to balance the books.

### **Low-Income Voters Less Likely to Support Tax Package**

As poll results started coming in, it appeared that the low-income voters who would stand to benefit the most from the tax increase were among its leading opponents. Interestingly, those who were more financially secure were more likely to support the proposal. According to the *Washington Post*, a University of Alabama at Birmingham poll taken a few days before the vote found that low- to middle-income voters opposed the tax increase by 30 percentage points while upper-income voters, the group facing tax increases, were opposed by a much lower margin, 14 percentage points.

After hearing Gov. Riley speak in Prattville, Ala., 81-year old lawyer Harold Howell was quoted by the *Washington Post* as saying, “I think everybody here feels like we’re overtaxed. But, you know, when you get down to it, what you’re asking for is peanuts compared to the incomes that people in this room here make. And it’s payback time for us. I got my education in this state, and I make a living out of this state, and it’s time to help the kids that’s coming up. I support you.”

In the end, according to the *Washington Post*, Riley’s own party came out against his proposal while its natural constituency—Democrats—kept their distance. Now, without a tax increase, Gov. Riley must consider other options, such as spending cuts to public schools, higher education, and Medicaid—to balance the state budget. Whatever the decision, it is the students in Alabama who continue to be cut out.

“Alabama Tied in Knots by Tax Vote”:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A4130-2003Aug16.html>

“Alabama Voters Reject Tax Increase”:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A51143-2003Sep9.html>

“Alabama Measure Would Raise Taxes and Hopes”:

<http://www.edweek.com/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=01alabama.h23>



### **RETHINKING HIGH SCHOOL: Aspen Institute Report Finds Lessons for High School Reform in Four Model States**

“On almost every statistical measure and for large groups of students, our high schools are not making the grade.” So begins a new report from the Aspen Institute that examines successful high school reform efforts currently underway in four states and draws practical lessons that can be useful to education policymakers and school officials across the country. In *Rethinking High School: The Next Frontier for State Policymakers*, Patricia W. McNeil looks at four states—California, Maine, Rhode Island, and Vermont—that have “examined the condition of their high schools, found them wanting and are attempting to do something about it.”

## Rethinking High School

(Continued from p. 5)

McNeil explains that the focus on high school reform in these four states occurred as a result of assessments and higher state standards as well as a general belief that high schools would have the most difficulty meeting new requirements. In the report, she outlines six lessons learned from successful high school reform efforts:

- Build a strong case for reform. Policymakers, stakeholders, and the general public need strong, compelling reasons to change.
- Base reform efforts on a clear vision of high schools of the future. States in the study focused on state standards, high expectations for all students, and a belief that all students can attend college.
- Align or realign state policies to support the vision.
- Technical assistance is absolutely necessary and needs to be delivered on site and be customized to meet individual or organizational needs.
- Additional resources are necessary to support reform, and are required for at least three to five years. Transition costs to a new type of high school include professional development and capacity building, support for substitute teachers and extra compensation for administrators and teachers who work after school or during the summer to plan and implement reforms.
- Reform takes time. States need to stay the course.

In her study, McNeil found that improvements stemming from successful high school reform efforts often appear in the following order: Increases in attendance, decreases in discipline problems, increases in interest in learning and college-going, increases in graduation rates, and finally, increases in achievement as measured by standardized test scores.

Research has shown that high schools need to establish certain conditions in order to achieve these results. For example, McNeil cites, among others, the need for a “laser-beam focus” on teaching and learning, closing the achievement gap, and enhancing teacher and administrator capacity to effectuate reforms.

The complete report is available at: <http://www.aspeninstitute.org>

### **Excerpt from *Rethinking High School: The Next Frontier for State Policymakers***

“Unless we pay serious attention to our high schools, a significant, and growing, number of our students—tomorrow’s citizens—will drop out or graduate unprepared for the adult world. If we are successful at the elementary and middle school level, but fail to change our high schools, then we risk losing much of what we initially achieved. States have an important role to perform in transforming our nation’s high schools, and some good examples of how to carry out that role. To date, high schools have been the weakest link in state and local school reform efforts. It is time to change that.”



## AMERICANS WANT A LARGER FEDERAL INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION: Committee for Education Funding Releases New Poll

Eighty-one percent of participants in a recent poll responded that the federal government should increase funding for education programs and 85 percent of participants thought this investment should be “more than five cents of every dollar it spends.” The federal budget currently allocates only 2.8 cents on every dollar to education.

The poll, released last week by the Committee for Education Funding (CEF), a nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of over 100 education organizations, shows that education remains a top priority for Americans. When asked to set aside spending on military efforts and homeland security and choose the most important federal spending priority this year, respondents gave precedence to education (38 percent) over prescription drug benefits for the elderly (28 percent) and tax cuts (16 percent) For education, these results mark an increase of 2 percentage points from a similar poll in January 2002.

The poll found that 80 percent of participants wanted “today’s students from preschool through college to have the same or better opportunities as previous generations.” Seventy-six percent wanted the federal government to increase its share of education funding because “state and local governments simply don’t have the money to meet the escalating costs of federal education requirements.” Specifically, 71 percent favored additional funding to help teachers and principals meet the new requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

To read more about the poll and see the complete results, visit CEF’s Web site at: <http://www.cef.org/News/templates/press.asp?articleid=1186&zoneid=2>



### Alliance for Excellent Education Re-Launches Web Site

On September 16, the Alliance for Excellent Education re-launched its Web site, complete with a new design, new case studies, and new facts and figures. The redesign makes the site more user-friendly by improving navigation and organization. Please visit <http://www.all4ed.org> and see the changes for yourself. We welcome comments or questions you have about the new site at [alliance@all4ed.org](mailto:alliance@all4ed.org).

### A Calendar of Upcoming Conferences on High School Reform

In order to foster participation in the many upcoming conferences on high school reform and to distinguish the themes among them, the **National High School Alliance** has created a national calendar that includes information on the focus, audience, and registration for each meeting. The National High School Alliance is a partnership of over forty organizations representing a diverse cross-section of perspectives and approaches, but sharing a common commitment to promoting the excellence, equity, and development of high school-aged youth.

Access the calendar at: <http://www.hsalliance.org/NationalCalendar.html>

**Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress** is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both in Washington, D.C., 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. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a non-profit organization working to make it possible for America’s 6 million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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In this issue:

- Education Funding Bill Passes Senate: Bill Provides Smallest Increase for Education in Eight Years
- House Passes \$10 Million DC Voucher Program: Voucher Opponents Criticize Vote Timing, Set Sights on Senate Debate
- Alabama Voters Defeat Tax Increase for Education
- Rethinking High School: Aspen Institute Report Finds Lessons for High School Reform in Four Model States
- Americans Want a Larger Federal Investment in Education: Committee for Education Funding Releases New Poll

### SAVE THE DATE:

The Alliance for Excellent Education will host its first annual Conference on American High School Policy:  
**November 16-18, 2003**  
**The National Press Club • Washington, D.C.**



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