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EXCELLENT EDUCATION

Straight A's:

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THE WAR ON SCHOOLS: *New York Times* Columnist Challenges the Country to Provide a Basic Public School Education for All Children

In a recent article for the *New York Times*, columnist Bob Herbert takes the nation to task for failing to provide a basic education for its students. In “The War on Schools,” he writes, “There’s something surreal about the fact that the United States of America, the richest, most powerful nation in history, can’t provide a basic public school education for all of its children.” He continues, “Actually, that’s wrong. Strike the word ‘can’t.’ The correct word is more damning, more reflective of the motives of the people in power. The correct word is “won’t.”

He argues that while the country prepares itself for war, another, less prominent crisis is being overlooked in our own classrooms. “Without giving the costs much thought, we’ll spend hundreds of billions of dollars on an oil-powered misadventure in the Middle East. But we won’t scrape together the money for sufficient textbooks and teachers, or even, in some cases, to keep the doors open at public schools in struggling districts from Boston on the East Coast to Portland on the West.”

Shrinking state budgets, combined with little relief from the federal government has forced school districts to take previously unthinkable actions to stay in the black. Karen Soehnge of the Texas Association of School Administrators, told the *New York Times* that “districts across the state have been in a cost-cutting mode for a number of years.” She continued, “When you continue that cutting over a lengthy period of time, you’re cutting to the bone. We’re concerned because in Texas we have increased standards for student learning. So we have increasing expectations and diminishing resources, two irreconcilable forces.”

In several events across the country, students have taken to the streets to demand more money for education. Herbert describes a recent event held in Albany, N.Y. “Among the banners and signs waved by the students was a placard that showed an American flag and said: ‘Public Education — An American Dream. A Dream That No One Wants to Pay For.’” Herbert also spoke with Marion Canedo, the superintendent of the Buffalo school system, who was part of the demonstration in Albany. “When [Ms. Canedo] talks about the cuts she’s had to make and the cuts currently being considered, her voice has

The War on Schools

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the tone of someone who has just witnessed a chain-reaction auto wreck. ‘It’s the worst thing I’ve ever seen, and I’ve been in the district 35 years,’ she said. ‘I mean we’re looking at crazy things, like a four-day week, no kindergarten, no pre-kindergarten, no sports.’” She continues, “I’ve done everything I could think of. I’ve closed schools. I’ve suspended service at schools. It’s been horrible.’

On the other side of the world, we’re preparing our military forces to invade a country on behalf of its citizens who are too weak or too timid to stand up against a dictator. However, here in our own country, we are neglecting those same kinds of citizens, students in our inner city schools and other high-poverty areas who cannot help themselves. Herbert writes: “There is no way to overstate the gulf between the need for funding and the reality of funding in urban school districts. And that gulf is widening, not narrowing.”

His column concludes with this sad commentary on our nation’s attitude toward public education:

Education is the food that nourishes the nation’s soul. When public officials refuse to provide adequate school resources for the young, it’s the same as parents refusing to feed their children. It’s unconscionable. It’s criminal. The public school picture across the country is wildly uneven. There are many superb school districts. But there are so many places like Buffalo (including big and small cities and rural areas), where the schools are deliberately starved of the resources they need, and those districts are the shame of a great nation.

When it comes to education financing, the divisions among federal, state and local government entities are mostly artificial. It’s everyone’s obligation to educate the next generation of Americans. It’s an insane society that can contemplate devastating and then rebuilding Iraq, but can’t bring itself to provide schooling for all of its young people here at home.

Read the complete column at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/06/opinion/06HERB.html>



BUDGET DEBATES BEGIN ON CAPITOL HILL: Secretary Paige Testifies, House and Senate Budget Committees Consider Budget Resolutions

Over the last couple of weeks, the congressional budgetary process has kicked into high gear as **U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige** testified before a House Appropriations Subcommittee and the House and Senate Budget Committees began work on a congressional budget resolution.

During his testimony, Paige encountered pointed criticism from several members (both Democrats and Republicans), about what they felt was inadequate funding for education programs. In response, Paige stressed that he and President Bush are willing to rework

the President's education budget request, but would not revise the total amount requested. As it now stands, the President's budget would essentially freeze education spending at the level Congress appropriated for 2003.

Rep. David Obey (D-WI), the subcommittee's ranking member, took Paige to task over what he believed were misleading statements regarding the President's funding increases for education. In his testimony, Paige said that the administration's request "seeks \$53.1 billion for Department of Education programs in 2004 [and] represents more than a 25 percent increase since 2001 and a 130 percent increase in federal education funding since fiscal year 1996." Rep. Obey noted that while Congress appropriated \$9.9 billion from fiscal 2001 to fiscal 2003, the President's budget requests only totaled an increase of \$2.7 billion.

House and Senate Budget Committees Consider Fiscal 2004 Budget Resolutions

After failing to pass a congressional budget resolution last year, congressional leaders have made passing an agreement on spending a top priority this year. Last Wednesday, the House and Senate Budget Committees began work on a budget with a goal of passage before the Easter recess in mid-April. While the Senate committee's budget plan provides about \$2.5 billion more for education than the President's request, the House version actually would cut education funding below the President's proposal.

In his opening statement, **House Budget Chairman Jim Nussle (R-IA)** stated his intention to present a balanced federal budget: "I don't want deficits, I don't like deficits, and I will not pretend that deficits don't matter," he said as he introduced a budget that focused on three areas: Protecting America and protecting Americans; getting Americans back to work and strengthening the economy; and getting the budget back on a path to being balanced.

Nussle was true to his word, but had to make difficult cuts to popular domestic programs to achieve it. He unveiled a budget that contains \$1.5 trillion in tax cuts as proposed by the President's economic plan, \$400 billion for prescription drug coverage, and showed a balanced budget before the end of the 10-year budget forecast. In order to close projected deficits, Nussle's budget, called the "chairman's mark," included deep spending cuts for almost all federal programs, with the exception of Social Security, unemployment insurance, domestic security, and military spending. For education, Nussle's plan recommends \$2.3 billion, or a 2.9 percent cut below the President's budget request.

Budget Committee Democrats offered several amendments to increase education funding, but all except one were defeated on party-line votes. One amendment offered would have added \$7.7 billion in fiscal 2004 for education programs to the chairman's mark, which would have raised programs funded under the *No Child Left Behind Act* to \$27.1 billion. The additional funding would have been enough money to: 1) raise the maximum Pell Grant to \$4,500; 2) restore \$1.6 billion for 46 education programs that the President's budget proposes to eliminate; and 3) increase funding for *No Child Left Behind Act* programs by a total of \$4.5 billion over the President's requested level; and 4)

House and Senate Budget Committees Consider Fiscal 2004 Budget Resolutions

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restore \$1.1 billion that the Republicans cut from the President's levels for these programs. The agreed upon amendment added \$223 million for the Impact Aid program which provides financial support to school districts on Indian lands or military bases. The majority of children served by this program have parents in the active military.

The Senate budget resolution, drafted by **Senate Budget Chairman Don Nickles (R-OK)**, provides an increase of \$900 million in education funding, or about two percent over the President's budget request. It would provide a \$1 billion increase for Title I and another \$1 billion increase for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. However, the Senate budget resolution would eliminate funding for 46 education programs as proposed in the President's budget.

Each budget resolution is scheduled to go to the floor of its respective chamber during the week of March 17, but the consensus among lawmakers and aides is that neither of the plans approved in committee has the votes to win passage on the floor, according to *CQ Weekly*. In all likelihood, the House and Senate will pass differing versions and look to hammer out an agreement during a House-Senate conference.



SERVING HOMELESS STUDENTS: Massachusetts Elementary School Educates Unique Student Population

A recent article in the *Boston Globe* told the story of Salisbury Elementary School's dedication to serving a large population of homeless students and its efforts to meet the unique challenges these students pose. Over the years, Salisbury Elementary School has worked closely with the Pettengill House, the only service agency in the area, to identify and serve homeless students. In fact, Deborah Smith, the executive director of the Pettengill House, maintains an office inside the school on Tuesdays.

While the school has been very helpful to students and their families, it and the Pettengill House are feeling the effects of state budget cuts. According to the *Globe*, the Pettengill House's funding was cut last June, and if not for more than \$200,000 in donations from the community, the agency would have closed a year ago.

Today, Smith says that she has enough money to keep the agency open until June 30, but the future is uncertain: "We have no idea what we'll do when July 1 rolls around. Like everyone else we're waiting to see what the governor's final budget looks like, and praying for a miracle."

Meanwhile, the school is facing its share of pressures. According to the school's principal, Christine Kneeland, one to three students leave or enter the school every week. "Some kids come in with a parent, others get dropped off in a cab," she says. "Because of the stresses they have at home, many of the children who come to us need counseling." The caseload is so heavy that the school's guidance counselor depends on four or five private counselors who come from outside agencies.

The Education for Homeless Children and Youth program within the U.S. Department of Education provides funding to schools to facilitate the enrollment of homeless students and to provide tutoring, transportation, and other services that help these students succeed in school. For fiscal 2003, Congress appropriated \$54.6 million for this program. The President's budget for fiscal 2004 requests \$50 million.

"We can't always fix what's wrong at home," says Carla Collins, the school district's special programs coordinator. "And frankly, that's not our job. Our job is to teach them, because if we teach them we give them the key. Education is the key to stopping the cycle."

Read the complete article at:

http://www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/061/north/Little_wanderersP.shtml



ONLINE TEACHERS COLLEGE OFFERS FULL CERTIFICATION THROUGH THE INTERNET

Last week, **U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige** announced the creation of a new online Teachers College that provides accredited certificate, undergraduate, and graduate academic degrees for current and prospective teachers. Paige was joined at the announcement by Utah Gov. Michael Leavitt and the president of the Western Governors University (WGU), Bob Mendenhall. The Teachers College will be a part of WGU, the first online, competency-based university, which is a consortium of 19 Western states and about 40 universities.

According to Paige, the Teachers College is largely aimed at retired members of the military or professionals from outside of the education profession who want to move into the teaching field: "We need to open the classroom door to the thousands of mid-career professionals who could make excellent teachers. The Teachers College will be invaluable in that effort because a Web-based program offers working adults the flexibility to pursue standards-based course work at their own pace and schedule."

The program not only would serve mid-career professionals coming into the field, it would also help current teachers obtain a master's degree, and allow paraprofessionals and teacher's aides to work toward full certification. The online catalog contains about 1,200 courses from 45 partnering institutions, including Brigham Young University, the University of Colorado, and Texas Tech University. Because courses take place online, they are accessible to teachers and other professionals who live in rural or remote areas of the country.

In September 2001, the U.S. Department of Education awarded WGU a \$10 million five-year Star Schools grant to help develop and acquire educational programming for pre-service and in-service teacher education programs and to operate and maintain the existing telecommunications system of WGU.

National Institutes in Reading Apprenticeship: Building Local Capacity for Middle and High School Reading Improvement

The Strategic Literacy Initiative (SLI) is a professional development and research program of WestEd that serves middle and high school educators, teacher leaders and teacher educators who work to increase adolescent literacy. SLI is now accepting team applications for Summer 2003 National Institutional in Reading Apprenticeship. The course is a week-long intensive experience in “Reading Apprenticeship” to teams of middle and high school teacher leaders and administrators. The program uses a framework that was developed with teams of teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area and included in SLI’s book *Reading for Understanding*.

SLI has found that students who are taught by teachers who participated in its program show significant gains on standardized reading comprehension tests, with the greatest gains made by English language learners. Since 1995, teachers working with SLI have taught over 90,000 middle and high school students.

For more information on the Reading Apprenticeship, visit WestEd at <http://www.wested.org/stratlit/whatsNew/new.shtml>



STATE BARRIERS UNDERMINE STUDENT ASPIRATIONS: New Report Finds Disconnect Between High School Graduation and Success in College

A new report finds that “88 percent of eighth graders expect to participate in some form of postsecondary education, and approximately 70 percent of high school *graduates* actually do go to college within two years of graduating.” These high percentages demonstrate an overwhelming desire among students to continue their education past high school. However, less than 12 percent of high school students actually know what curriculum they need to prepare themselves for the rigors of postsecondary education. Many students are shocked to discover they need remediation at the beginning of their postsecondary education only three months after graduating from high school.

Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations, released by Stanford University’s Bridge Project, found that state high school graduation requirements do not align with entrance and placement requirements in higher education institutions. Andrea Venezia, an author of the paper, offered several reasons for this disconnect, including little communication between the state education agencies, which set the graduation standards, and institutions of higher education.

The study focused on two-year “broad access postsecondary institutions” because these schools admit almost all students who apply, comprise about 85 percent of all postsecondary schools, and educate approximately 80 percent of the nation’s first-year college students. Sixty-three percent of students who enter these ‘broad access’ schools need remediation compared to 40 percent in more selective four-year institutions.

Quite often state graduation requirements and state exit exams do not set high enough standards to get their graduates prepared for college. As a result, many students require several courses of remediation before they can take classes toward a degree and often drop out before even completing courses at a two-year institution. Those students who were most in need of remediation were also most likely to quit school.

The report recommends that the state education agencies reform their systems to prepare their students better for college. It also said that institutions of higher education need to actively publicize their academic standards so that state education agencies can raise their standards for graduation and provide the necessary courses to better prepare their students for college courses. Such a modification would transform the high school senior year from a slump into an academically rigorous and intellectually stimulating time. Underlying all of these recommendations is an increased federal role that would expand grant money to stimulate more state-level K-16 policymaking and provide the necessary governance and accountability standards.

Learn more about the report at:

<http://www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/publications.html>



STATE BUDGET SHORTFALLS DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECT HIGHER EDUCATION SPENDING: New Alert Finds that Existing State Tax Structures Cannot Adequately Fund Higher Education Budgets

According to a recent policy alert, all but a handful of states will experience difficulty maintaining current spending on public services without making significant changes to their existing tax structures. (The complete alert is available at: http://www.highereducation.org/pa_0203/index.html)

“State Shortfalls Projected Throughout the Decade,” the February 2003 policy alert by Dennis Jones of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, found this revenue shortfall will force state legislatures to continue to reduce their spending on higher education, even with normal economic growth over the next eight years. “This boom-and-bust cycle has become a traditional state pattern of treating colleges and universities disproportionately well during prosperous times—and disproportionately poorly in tight budgetary circumstances,” Jones writes.

State actions during the boom of the ’90s will place enormous pressure on state budgets, and especially on higher education funding, in the future. Much like the federal government at the time, state budgeters saw surpluses well into the future and decided to not only cut taxes, but to fund popular new programs. These decisions from the ’90s, combined with the economic downturn, have resulted in huge state deficits.

The report found that most states will continue to face shortfalls and cuts in higher education funding even if something other than temporary gimmicks is used to balance the budget—especially considering the increasing burden that Medicaid places on states. “The rapidly escalating costs of Medicaid, more than anything else, explain why total state and local spending is projected to grow faster than spending for higher education in most states,” according to the report

Straight A’s: An Update on Public Education 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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