



# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE APPROVES \$10 MILLION INCREASE FOR STRIVING READERS

The fiscal year 2006 Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education spending bill was approved by the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee on July 14. In it, the Striving Readers program is slated to receive \$35 million—an increase of \$10.2 million over last year and \$5 million over the version already passed by the U.S. House of Representatives. Overall, the bill would allocate \$56.7 billion to programs in the U.S. Department of Education, an increase of \$132.2 million over last year and \$670 million more than the president requested. While the bill's total amount is equal to the version passed by the House last month, there are some significant differences in the way some programs would be funded by the two bills.

“We are constantly battling over which worthwhile projects are going to be underfunded,” said **Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA), chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education**. “It gets tougher every year, but I think we got the major programs taken care of.”

**Alliance for Excellent Education President and former West Virginia Governor Bob Wise** commended the members of the Senate Appropriations Committee for recognizing the importance of improving the reading and writing skills of American secondary school students, but noted that the Senate amount “still fell far short of the \$200 million President Bush requested. Six million young people are at risk of not graduating from high school because they read so poorly that they literally cannot comprehend the material in their textbooks,” he said. “Many of these kids face futures of dead-end jobs, long periods of unemployment, and an increased risk of incarceration. The Striving Readers program is an important ingredient in the recipe for improving the literacy skills of these students.”

Like the House, the Senate faced tight budget constraints and was limited in the amount that it could spread among signature programs such as Title I and special education. Under the Senate committee bill, Title I would receive \$12.84 billion, a \$100 million increase—the same as the House version. Special education grants to states would also receive a \$100 million increase, slightly less than the \$10.74 billion the program would receive in the House version.

**Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA)**, a champion of special education programs, protested that this would decrease the federal government's contribution to special education for the first time in a decade, from 18.6 percent to 18 percent. “It's not right to balance our budget on the backs of the people who need it most,” he said.

## Senate Appropriations Committee Approves \$10 Million Increase for Striving Readers

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The Senate bill also eliminates funding for the Smaller Learning Communities program, as had been requested by the president. The House bill allocated \$94.5 million for the program. The Elementary and Secondary School Counseling program would get a slight boost in the Senate bill, from \$34.7 million last year to \$36 million in FY 2006. However, according to the No Child Left Behind Act, if the amount appropriated for this program is less than \$40 million, the secretary of education “shall award grants to local educational agencies *only to establish or expand counseling programs in elementary schools.*” In other words, no money can be distributed to secondary schools.

An updated chart of selected federal education programs that can help middle and high school students is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/StraightAs/Fiscal06ProgramChart.pdf>.



### U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION TO CALCULATE NEW GRADUATION RATE: “Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate” Will Be Used to Compare State-Reported Rates Under NCLB

Recognizing that several national organizations have been “justifiably clamoring for a more accurate, consistent, and transparent method of calculating high school graduation rates,” **Deputy Secretary of Education Ray Simon** announced on July 13 that the U.S. Department of Education would begin calculating an “Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate” for all states.

“A more comprehensive and accurate assessment of how many students graduate from high school is sorely needed,” Simon said. “We understand and appreciate that to accurately calculate such information, states will need much more comprehensive and sophisticated data collection systems than the vast majority currently have in place.”

As states work toward more comprehensive data collections systems, the U.S. Department of Education will publish states’ Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate alongside the graduation rates that are currently reported under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The new calculation represents the first step toward gathering and making available better graduation rate data and making high schools more accountable for dropouts.

According to *Getting Honest About Grad Rates: How States Play the Numbers and Students Lose*, a June 2005 report from the Education Trust, the data that most states submitted, if any, under NCLB were either incomplete or “dubiously high” when compared to the results of independent analyses of state graduation rates. In fact, fifteen states reported graduation rates that differed by more than 15 percent, according to an independent analysis by the **Urban Institute’s Chris Swanson**. In North Carolina, for example, the state-reported graduation rate of 97 percent was a full thirty-three percentage points higher than the 64 percent rate that Swanson calculated.

“By comparing this figure with the reported rate, we will have a truer picture of the national trend and can identify which states most need to improve their individual reporting,” said Simon. “More importantly, improving how we understand and report these more accurate graduation

rates will allow us to better target resources and tailor instruction for kids who might otherwise be invisible until it's too late.”

In calculating the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate, the department will use existing data submitted through the Common Core of Data, which is part of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate is the number of high school graduates receiving a regular diploma in a given year divided by the average of the number of students enrolled in eighth grade five years earlier, ninth grade four years earlier, and tenth grade three years earlier. According to Simon, the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate has been shown to track very closely with true on-time graduation rates.

More information is available from the department's press release, which is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2005/07/07132005.html>.



### **GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION: New Report Finds Declining High School Graduation Rates in Southern States**

“Few people would have predicted that graduation rates would decline, particularly after the emphasis in the last decade on reading in the early grades and on state accountability systems,” reads a new report from the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). However, according to the report, the percentages of high school students who receive a regular high school diploma in four years have been declining in most SREB states in recent years.<sup>1</sup> In fact, between 1992 and 2002, only three SREB states (Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas) saw an increase in their graduation rates, while the thirteen remaining states experienced an average drop of more than 5 percent.

Given these results, the report, *Getting Serious About High School Graduation*, calls on policymakers, education leaders, business leaders, parents, and students to treat high school graduation as a “top priority.” “Making progress toward all young adults having a high school diploma . . . is critical—not just for the well-being of individuals, but for the well-being of [the] state,” said **Mark Musick, president of the Southern Regional Education Board**. “High school dropouts do not have the knowledge and skills required to be successful in today’s workforce, and many of them show up in welfare budgets, public health costs, and prison rolls.”

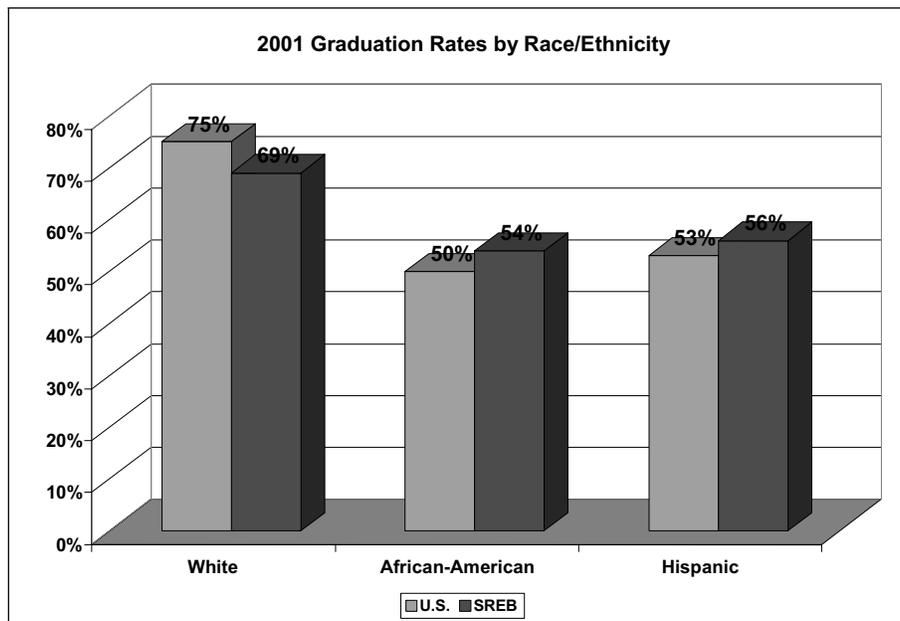
Using data from the Urban Institute, the report noted that SREB states differ from the national norm when it comes to the graduation gap between white students and African-American and Hispanic students. Nationwide, the graduation gap between white students and their African-American peers is 25 percent; for Hispanic students, the graduation gap is 22 percent. However, as shown in the chart on page four, the graduation gap between white students and African-American and Hispanic students in SREB states is much narrower. The smaller gap is due to the fact that SREB states have higher graduation rates for African-American and Hispanic students when compared to the national average, but graduate white students at a rate six percentage points below the national average.

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<sup>1</sup> Southern Regional Education Board member states include Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

## Getting Serious About High School Graduation

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The report called on states to set ambitious high school graduation targets for all groups of students and make them a part of state accountability systems. To ensure that assessment systems do not contribute to low graduation rates, states should also provide sufficient help to students who need it to reach higher standards. Also, noting that more students fail classes in the ninth grade than in any other year, the report recommended that states focus on the transition to high school. For example, in Florida, all middle school students with low scores on state tests have a personalized plan to help them succeed academically.

While ninth-grade transition programs can help, the report stressed that the dropout problem extends beyond the ninth grade. “In SREB states, roughly 11 percent of students entering their senior year in 2003 did not graduate the following spring or summer,” it reads. The report suggested that states develop opportunities such as charter or technical high schools for students who are two grade levels behind their peer group. States should also “provide more flexibility—without lowering standards—for those students who struggle day to day to remain in high school.” Such options could include Internet-based instruction that would allow students to take and retake courses needed for graduation outside of school hours or more remedial support for students as they take courses required for graduation.

The report also called on policymakers and education leaders to work with business leaders and corporate foundations in a joint effort to reform high schools—especially those with low graduation rates. “Business leaders are also getting involved in high school reform as a way to increase the number of qualified workers available and to improve their preparation,” the report reads. “They understand that the current education system is not graduating an adequate percentage of students and that many of those who do graduate are not ready for postsecondary education and workforce training.”

The complete report is available at <http://www.sreb.org/indexPage2.asp#Graduation>.

## **Better-Trained Workforce Leads Toyota to Choose Canada over U.S. for New Factory**

Earlier this month, Toyota announced that it would build a new 1,300-worker factory in Ontario, Canada, rather than in the United States because Ontario workers are better trained. This decision was made even as several U.S. states were offering hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies to help build the \$800 million factory. Ultimately, the subsidies were not enough to offset the extra costs Toyota thought it would incur training American workers.

“The level of the workforce in general is so high [in Canada] that the training program you need for people, even for people who have not worked in a Toyota plant before, is minimal compared to what you have to go through in the southeastern United States,” said **Gerry Fedchun, president of the Automotive Parts Manufacturers’**

**Association.**

According to an article in the *Canadian Press*, “industry experts say Ontarians are easier and cheaper to train—helping make it more cost-efficient to train workers” when a new plant opens. The article also said that Nissan and Honda had “encountered difficulties getting new plants up to full production in recent years in Mississippi and Alabama due to an untrained—and often illiterate—workforce.” In Alabama, for example, trainers had to use “pictorials” to teach some workers how to use high-tech equipment.

“Toyota to build 100,000 vehicles per year in Woodstock, Ont., starting 2008” is available at <http://www.cbc.ca/cp/business/050630/b0630102.html>.



## **READING SCORES FLAT FOR SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLDS SINCE 1971: Long-Term Trend Assessment Shows Large Gains for Nine-Year-Olds Over Same Time Period**

Between 1971 and 2004, there was no measurable change in average reading scores for seventeen-year-olds, according to the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) long-term-trend assessment in reading, also known as the Nation’s Report Card. Average scores for thirteen-year-olds showed no measurable difference from 1999, but were higher than scores in 1971 and 1975. Among nine-year-olds, average reading scores are higher than any previous assessment year, with an increase of seven points since 1999.

The dramatic improvement among nine-year-old students was good news to supporters of the No Child Left Behind Act, who were quick to give NCLB credit for the increases. “The results from the newest Report Card are in and the news is outstanding,” said **U.S. Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings**. “Three years ago, our country made a commitment that no child would be left behind. Today’s Report Card is proof that No Child Left Behind is working—it is helping to raise the achievement gap of young students of every race and from every type of family background. And the achievement gap that has persisted for decades in the younger years between minorities and whites has shrunk to its smallest size in history.”

Some experts disagree with that assessment. According to a *Washington Post* article, **Darvin Winick, chairman of the National Assessment Governing Board**, “urged caution about attributing progress to No Child Left Behind and said the narrowing of the achievement gap can be traced back to at least 1999, before President Bush took office.” Several other analysts have noted that the NAEP study was conducted during the 2003-2004 school year, in the early stages of the implementation of NCLB.

## Reading Scores Flat for Seventeen-Year-Olds Since 1971

(Continued from p. 5)

While the average scores for thirteen-year-olds showed no measurable difference from 1999, overall gains in reading scores were evident among higher-performing students—those scoring at the seventy-fifth and ninetieth percentiles—between 1971 and 2004. However, seventeen-year-olds showed no measurable improvement in reading scores at any of the selected percentiles. In fact, reading performance at or above level 300 (out of a 500 point scale)—which represents understanding complicated information—has declined by three percentage points since 1994.

Students who took the reading assessment were also asked how often they read for fun. Between 1984 and 2004, there was no measurable change in the percentage of nine-year-olds who read for fun. However, at ages thirteen and seventeen, the percentage of students who said they read for fun almost every day was lower in 2004 than in 1984. This trend was accompanied by an increase over the same twenty-year period in the percentage who said they never or hardly ever read for fun. At all three ages, the students who indicated that they read for fun almost every day had higher average reading scores in 2004 than those who never or hardly ever read for fun.

The report also covered trends in mathematics. While the average math scores increased by nine points from 1999 to 2004 among nine-year-olds and five points among thirteen-year-olds, the average score for seventeen-year-olds was not measurably different from 1973 to 1999.

While Secretary Spellings was happy with the overall results, she indicated that much more progress needed to be made. “We are at the beginning of the journey and certainly have room for improvement, particularly at the high school level,” she said. “We must support older students with the same can-do attitude that helped their younger brothers and sisters.”

*NAEP 2004 Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance in Reading and Mathematics* is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/ltr/results2004/>.

Secretary Spellings’s complete statement is available at <http://www.ed.gov/print/news/pressreleases/2005/07/07142005.html>.

“School Achievement Gap Is Narrowing” is available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/14/AR2005071400718.html>.



### **KILL YOUR TELEVISION?: New Zealand Study Connects Excessive Television Viewing with Lower Levels of Educational Attainment**

Increased time spent watching television during childhood and adolescence is associated with a lower level of educational attainment by early adulthood, according to a new research study, “Association of Television Viewing During Childhood with Poor Educational Achievement,” published in the July 2005 issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*. The study shows that the effects were independent of intelligence, family socioeconomic status, and childhood behavioral problems.

As part of the research, information was collected on an individual's television-watching habits beginning at age five. Between the ages of five and eleven, children's parents were asked how much time the study members watched television during the week. At thirteen and fifteen years of age, study members were asked about their TV habits on weekdays and weekends. At age twenty-six, an individual's highest level of education attainment was scored on a four-point scale: 1, no qualifications; 2, any school certification pass; 3, higher-level school qualification or postschool qualification (trade certificate or diploma); and 4, bachelor's degree or higher.

Overall, research found that study members watched television for a mean time of 2.06 hours on weekdays between five and eleven years of age, and 3.13 hours per weekday at thirteen and fifteen years of age.

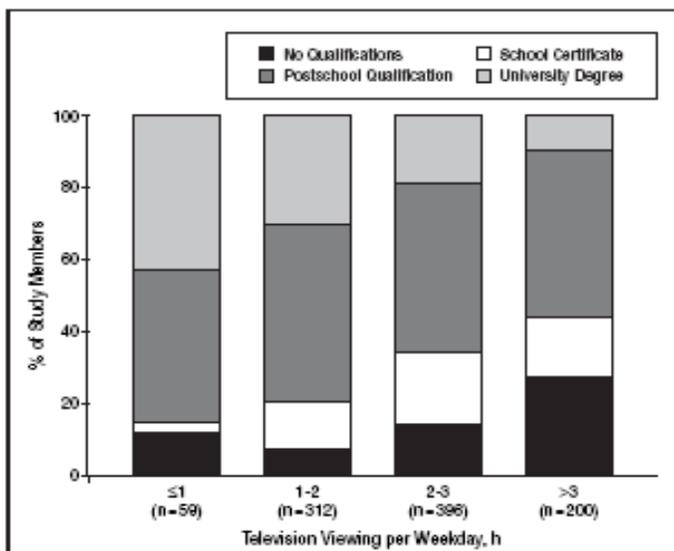


Figure. Child and adolescent television viewing and educational achievement by 26 years of age. Television viewing is measured as unadjusted mean hours per weekday between 5 and 15 years of age. The percentages of Study members in each viewing group were 6.1% (≤1 hour), 32.3% (1-2 hours), 41.0% (2-3 hours), and 20.7% (>3 hours). (Because of rounding, percentages do not total 100.)

According to the report, and as the figure to the left demonstrates, “increased childhood and adolescent television viewing time was associated with a higher chance of having no formal qualifications and a lower chance of having obtained a university degree by twenty-six years of age.”

The research project studied children who were born in New Zealand between April 1, 1972, and March 31, 1973. The first follow-up assessment came when the child was three years of age. Additional assessments occurred at five, seven, nine, eleven, thirteen, fifteen, eighteen, twenty-one, and twenty-six years of age. (At age twenty-six, researchers assessed the 980 (96 percent) of the 1019 study members who were still alive.)

Source: “Association of Television Viewing During Childhood with Poor Educational Achievement.”

The complete report is available at <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/159/7/614>.

**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 nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America's secondary school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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