



# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **HOUSE PASSES BUDGET RESOLUTION: Prospects of a Compromise with the Senate Appear Dim**

The U.S. House of Representatives finally approved its version of a congressional budget resolution after the Republican leadership agreed to provide an additional \$3.1 billion for labor, health, and education programs. The resolution passed by a 218 to 210 party-line vote on May 18. The measure now moves to a House-Senate conference; however, differences on the overall spending cap between the two resolutions are likely to make a final agreement difficult, if not impossible, to reach. As passed, the House version maintains President Bush's overall spending cap of \$873 billion, whereas the Senate version exceeds Bush's maximum spending level by at least \$16 billion.

Passing a budget resolution that kept to the president's fiscal parameters was seen as a significant achievement for **House Majority Leader John Boehner (R-OH)**, who had dealt with considerable infighting among different factions of the Republican Party over the past few months. "We successfully worked with conservatives, moderates, and appropriators alike to come together as a team and pass a responsible budget that controls spending," said Boehner.

Unlike the House, the Senate added about \$16 billion in spending over the president's cap in order to pass its budget resolution back in March. Included among the Senate's additions was a \$7 billion amendment that added to the pool of money available for the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, and Labor.

Over the past few weeks, negotiations on the House budget resolution were stalled as House moderates also held out for a \$7 billion addition. To achieve that aim, **House Appropriations Committee Chairman Jerry Lewis (R-CA)** agreed to shift \$4.1 billion in increases for defense and foreign aid to programs funded in the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education spending bill. In an agreement with the House Republican leadership, moderates received a pledge that the remaining \$3 billion would be provided; the deal assumes that at least \$1 billion would come from unallocated Iraq reconstruction funds while the other \$2 billion would come from unspecified cuts—but not from reductions in spending on Medicaid, Medicare, food stamps, or any other programs designed for the "very people we are trying to help," according to **Representative Michael Castle (R-DE)**, who led the holdout among moderate Republicans.

Democrats, however, were very skeptical that the promised funding would be in place at the end of the day. "The fact is, [Republican moderates] are now selling out for a promise that if sometime in the deep dark distant future somebody does something to change this budget resolution, then there might be a table scrap or two left for additional education and healthcare," said

## House Passes Budget Resolution

(Continued from p. 1)

**Representative David Obey (D-WI), the top Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee.** “There is about as much chance of that happening as there is of the Chicago Cubs winning the pennant this year.”<sup>1</sup>

Because of the \$16 billion difference between the House and Senate resolutions, the prospects of a compromise on a congressional budget resolution are dim. **House Budget Committee Chairman Jim Nussle (R-IA)** acknowledged that the delay in passing the House version could pose a problem. “Clearly, at this point in the year, it’s going to be tough to get a conference agreement,” he said. “But if there’s anyone in the Senate who can get it done, it’s [**Senate Budget Committee Chairman] Judd Gregg (R-NH)**.”



### **OLDER STUDENTS’ SCIENCE SCORES REMAIN FLAT: “Nation’s Report Card” Scores Show Gains in Early Grades but No Improvement in Middle and High Schools**

Similar to results from national tests in reading and math, scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in science show that students in the early grades continued to show progress while eighth- and twelfth-grade students’ scores remained flat. The test, also referred to as the “Nation’s Report Card,” finds a narrowing of the achievement gap at the fourth-grade level between white students and their black and Hispanic peers. However, at the eighth-grade level, the achievement gap remained unchanged while the difference between white and black students’ scores at the twelfth-grade level grew larger. The test results will certainly be added to the ongoing arguments on how to improve American students’ weak science skills and how to better prepare students for the global economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings** pointed to the test results as another example that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is working but also used the opportunity to push for an expansion of NCLB’s accountability provisions into high schools. “The Science 2005 Report contains some encouraging news for our students and schools,” she said. “It provides further evidence that accountability and assessments are working to raise achievement levels, even in subjects not directly tested under the No Child Left Behind Act. .... But much more work remains to be done. The answer is more accountability, not less.”

Results were most disappointing at the twelfth-grade level, where the average score declined from 150 in 1996 to 147 in 2005. In addition, the percentage of students who scored “below basic” rose from 43% in 1996 to nearly one half (46%) in 2005. Meanwhile, the percentage of twelfth-grade students who scored at grade level fell from 57% in 1996 to 54% in 2005.

“Our fourth graders are doing better—that’s the good news,” said **Darvin M. Winick, chairman of the National Assessment Governing Board**, which sets policy for NAEP. “But the 12th-grade results are distressing, there’s no other way to slice it. The Bush administration and just

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<sup>1</sup> As of May 30, the Chicago Cubs had a record of 19-31 and trailed the St. Louis Cardinals by 13.5 games in the Central Division. The Las Vegas odds of the Cubs winning the pennant are 18 to 1.

about everybody else is complaining about the high schools, and these results show there's really something to complain about."

At the fourth-grade level, all student groups had higher average science scores and higher percentages of students at or above the "basic" level than in any previous years. However, even with the gains, more than one third of all fourth graders performed below the basic level. At the eighth-grade level, 43% of all students scored "below basic," and black students were the only eighth-grade student group to show improvement since 1996.

### **Large Achievement Gaps Remain at All Grade Levels**

Due in large part to dramatic gains by black and Hispanic fourth graders, the achievement gap between white fourth graders and their black and Hispanic classmates narrowed slightly. Since 2000, scores for Hispanic fourth-grade students have jumped from 122 to 133, while black students' scores improved from 122 to 129. Fourth-grade white students' scores improved slightly, from 159 to 162. However, significant achievement gaps continue to exist at all grade levels. At the eighth-grade level, the report found no movement in the achievement gap, but at the twelfth-grade level, the achievement gap between white and black students actually increased by 6 points. The gap between white and Hispanic twelfth-grade students remained the same.

	White Scale Score	Hispanic Scale Score	<b>White-Hispanic Gap</b>	Black Scale Score	<b>White-Black Gap</b>
4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	162	133	<b>29</b>	129	<b>33</b>
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	160	129	<b>31</b>	124	<b>36</b>
12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	156	128	<b>28</b>	120	<b>36</b>

In discussing the results from the science assessment, both Spellings and Winick linked science scores to a student's ability to read and do math. "If the kids can't read, and they can't do basic math, they're going to have a hard time in science," Winick noted.

Spellings said, "The report also underscores the vital importance of reading and mathematics. Gains made in these foundational subjects have a positive impact across the academic spectrum. As we work with states to add science assessments in the 2007-08 school year, we will not let up in our effort to bring all students up to grade level in reading and math."

There is still a lot of work to do to improve students' reading levels, especially in the later grades. According to the results of the NAEP long-term-trend assessment in reading, there was no measurable change in average reading scores for 17-year-olds between 1971 and 2004. In addition, the 2005 Nation's Report Card in reading found that nearly one third of all eighth-grade students read below the basic level.

The complete report is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006466>.

Secretary Spellings's complete statement is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2006/05/05242006.html>.



## **FLORIDA SEES READING GAINS: Coaches and Personalized Plans Translate into Higher Reading Scores**

The latest results from the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) indicate that Florida students have made the largest year-to-year gains in reading since 2001. Statewide, education officials were especially proud of gains at the middle school level, where about 57% of middle school students scored at or above grade level in reading—a 6-point increase over last year.

“We have a focus like never before at the middle schools,” said **Florida Education Commissioner John Winn**. “The interventions that are being provided at schools continue to be effective.”

The first step toward improving reading in the middle grades came in June 2004 when **Florida Governor Jeb Bush (R)** signed the Middle Grades Reform Act, which placed reading coaches in 240 middle schools throughout the state and provided more rigorous middle school course work to help prepare students for high school. Beginning in fall 2004, each public school with more than a quarter of its students in any grade in grades 6–8 not reading on grade level had to develop a Rigorous Reading Requirement as the primary component of its school improvement.

Under the act, schools also had to develop a Personalized Middle School Success Plan for each sixth-grade student who scored below Level 3 in reading on the FCAT. The plan detailed how the school would help improve a student’s skills and had to be developed in collaboration with the student and his or her parent and teacher.

Florida continues to build onto the Middle Grades Reform Act. Last year alone, the state hired 540 reading coaches to bring even more reading into classrooms. “We had a big reading initiative this year, with teachers undergoing comprehensive training in addition to using a progress monitoring tool to make assessments throughout the year,” **Sarasota assistant superintendent Lori White** told the *Herald-Tribune*. “It’s very encouraging.”

Based on the FCAT results, 57% of middle school students are reading at or above grade level (Level 3), a 6% increase from 2005. At the same time, the percentage of middle school students reading at the lowest level (Level 1) declined from 30% to 20%. The results also showed marked improvement on the part of minority students. This year, 39% of African-American students were reading at grade level, an increase of 13% over last year. Among Latino students, 50% were reading at grade level, compared to 35% last year.

In his state of the state address earlier this year, Governor Bush presented his “A++ Plan for Education,” which would continue to reform the middle grades but also extend into high schools. His plan would require middle school students to earn 12 credits in math, science, language arts, and social studies before they are promoted to high school. It would provide summer academies to assist struggling students who need extra help in the required subjects and intensive reading instruction for students who read below grade level. Students achieving at higher levels could take high school courses while they are still in middle school. To help make high school relevant for students, Bush would also allow students to choose a major based on their career paths and interests.

“Florida has witnessed what education reforms can do to improve student learning as evidenced by this recent success,” said Winn. “Now Governor Bush’s A++ Plan for Education will bring relevance and rigor to our middle and high schools so we may witness a high level of success for these students as well.”

Read Governor Bush’s press release at <http://www.flgov.com/release/7856>.



## **TAKING THE LEAD: Maryland Becomes First State in Nation to Codify NGA Compact**

Earlier this month, **Maryland Governor Robert Ehrlich (R)** signed legislation that will establish accurate and honest comparisons of graduation rates from high school to high school and district to district. The new law supports the intent of the National Governors Association (NGA) Compact on Graduation Rates, now signed by all state governors, in which governors agreed to begin improving state data collection and implementing a standard 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate.

The NGA Compact was necessary because the U.S. Department of Education had permitted considerable latitude in the way graduation rate data is reported under the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. As a result, many states had taken advantage of that flexibility to mask the severity of their problems when reporting high school graduation rates to parents, residents, and the nation.

However, as **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**, noted in his testimony before the Maryland House of Delegates’ Ways and Means Committee, signing the compact was not the end of the hard work. “As a former governor, I realize that the compact is neither a binding agreement nor a self-executing document,” Wise said. “On its face, the compact is simply an agreement between a governor and his colleagues. Without an act by the legislature to codify this commitment, there is no legal obligation for its terms to be honored this year or in future years.”

The legislation was originally introduced by **Maryland Delegate Ana Sol Gutierrez (D)** and **Maryland Senator Gwendolyn Britt (D)**. It was developed in collaboration with the Harvard Civil Rights Project and further refined by the Alliance for Excellent Education, the Education Trust, and other NGA task force participants.

The Maryland initiative was backed by the National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators and the National Black Caucus of State Legislators. Working with other interested parties, these two caucuses have also developed model legislation that can be introduced in state legislatures across the country, allowing others to follow Maryland’s exemplary lead on this issue.

“In enacting this legislation, the legislature and Governor Bob Ehrlich made the decision to hold their state accountable for real improvement in its graduation rate—not because the federal government held its feet to the fire, but because it is the right thing to do for all of Maryland’s kids,” Wise said. “Our nation’s future competitiveness and productivity depend on improving our high schools. But to make the right reform decisions, policymakers and educators need

## **Taking the Lead** (Continued from p. 5)

accurate, reliable information. Maryland has taken an important step toward that goal, which the rest of the country should applaud and emulate.”

Governor Wise’s complete testimony before the Maryland House of Delegates’ Ways and Means Committee is available at [http://www.all4ed.org/press/pr\\_021406.html#Testimony](http://www.all4ed.org/press/pr_021406.html#Testimony).



### **CALIFORNIA SUPREME COURT REINSTATES STATE GRADUATION EXAM: State Ruling Could Prove Crucial as Other States Develop Exit Exams**

California’s high school seniors will have to pass the state’s exit exam before they can receive their high school diplomas; the California Supreme Court has reinstated passage of the graduation exam as a requirement for obtaining a diploma. The court’s ruling means that nearly 47,000 seniors, about 10% of California’s high school seniors, are likely to be denied a high school diploma because they have not passed either the math or language arts part of the exam.

“This is a clear victory for public education,” said **California Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell**. “The students who have worked very hard to pass this exam will be given a diploma that signifies their mastery of essential skills in reading and math.”

On May 12, **Alameda County Superior Court Judge Robert B. Freedman** suspended the exam requirement and said that the test discriminates against students who have not passed it. He ruled that these students have not had the same opportunity to learn the material because they are more likely to attend overcrowded schools that lack teachers with proper credentials. Of the nearly 47,000 students who have not passed the test, 20,600 have limited English skills and 28,300 are low-income.

But in a divided ruling on May 24, the California Supreme Court reinstated the exam requirement. Although the court declined to consider the arguments against the exam, it ordered an appeals court to make a decision on whether the test should remain a graduation requirement. **Marsha Bedwell, lead counsel for the California Department of Education**, said that she did not know when the appeals court would consider the case but expected the supreme court’s ruling to remain in place through this year’s graduations. In light of the state supreme court’s ruling, individual school districts must now decide whether students who have not passed both the language arts and math portions of the exam will be allowed to “walk” in graduation ceremonies and perhaps receive a certificate of completion in lieu of a diploma.

According to *Los Angeles Times*, citing the Center on Education Policy, about half of the nation’s states require seniors to pass an exit exam to graduate. “Nearly all of those states have won legal challenges to their exams,” it reads. “With several other states currently developing exit exams, the case against California is seen as a crucial test.”

“Justices Restore Exit Exam” is available at <http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/la-me-exit25may25,1,204882.story>.



## ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION HOLDS FORUM ON DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONMAKING

On May 24, the Alliance for Excellent Education held a forum in conjunction with the Civil Rights Working Group about the important links between data-driven decisionmaking and promising practices in the effort to close the student achievement gap.

“Like these distinguished researchers and practitioners, the Alliance is committed to the use of data as a vital tool in our campaign to ensure that every child graduates high school prepared for college and the modern work place,” said **Bob Wise, Alliance for Excellent Education president and former governor of West Virginia**. “We believe data opens discussions of race, class, and culture that tend to be overlooked in general discussions and, as such, it is one of the most powerful levers there is to address social justice issues.”

The first panel, Using Data to Close the Student Achievement Gap, featured **Nancy Love, principal investigator and project director of the Using Data Project** and **Pamela Bernabei-Rorrer, a math coach at the Canton City (OH) School District**. The discussion, which included **Jim Kohlmoos, president and CEO of the National Education Knowledge Industry Association**, as a respondent, focused on the Using Data Project, which provides professional development experiences and sustained learning opportunities to help educational leaders develop the skills, knowledge, and abilities to use data effectively to improve programs, policies, and learning in all classrooms.

The second panel, The Link Between Data and Civil Rights, featured **Michael Holzman, Ph.D., consultant to the Schott Foundation**, who illustrated the importance of data in understanding educational practices. **Claire E. Sylvan, Ed.D., executive director of the Internationals Network for Public Schools**, talked about Internationals’ development and support of a network of International High Schools that serve late-entry immigrant English-language learners.

Audio from this event, as well as PowerPoint presentations, and other supplemental materials will be available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/>.

### Alliance Joins STAND UP Campaign

STAND UP, a national campaign to make the public more aware of the dropout crisis in American high schools and to provide them with the tools to make a difference, was unveiled on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on April 11. The campaign’s goal is to ensure that students receive the support they need to graduate from high school ready for college, work, and citizenship.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is proud to announce that it has become an official member of the coalition, along with 15 other organizations that have joined the campaign since the launch on April 11.

More information on the campaign is available at <http://www.standup.org>

***Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress*** is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both 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. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America’s secondary school students to achieve high standards.



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In this issue:

- House Passes Budget Resolution: Prospects of a Compromise with the Senate Appear Dim
- Older Students' Science Scores Remain Flat: "Nation's Report Card" Scores Show Gains in Early Grades but No Improvement in Middle and High Schools
- Florida Sees Reading Gains: Coaches and Personalized Plans Translate into Higher Reading Scores
- Taking the Lead: Maryland Becomes First State in Nation to Codify NGA Compact
- California Supreme Court Reinstates State Graduation Exam: State Ruling Could Prove Crucial as Other States Develop Exit Exams
- Alliance for Excellent Education Holds Forum on Data-Driven Decisionmaking



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