



# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **GONE CAMPAIGNIN': Congress Delays Decision on Education Spending Until After Election Day**

On September 29, Congress approved \$70 billion for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of a record \$447.6 billion defense spending bill. It included within that bill a stopgap spending resolution that enabled members to put off making a decision on funding for the U.S. Department of Education until after Election Day.

In the House of Representatives, two issues—a disagreement over funding levels and a provision to increase the minimum wage—are holding up consideration of the Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education spending bill. With no Democrats likely to support the bill, it will need near unanimous support from Republican members in order to pass.

In May, House moderates received a pledge from **House Majority Leader John Boehner (R-OH)** for an additional \$7 billion for the Departments of Labor, HHS, and Education in exchange for their support on the congressional budget resolution. In a letter to Boehner on September 27, **Representative Mike Castle (R-DE)** and twenty-three other House Republican moderates renewed their push for the additional funding. Currently, the House version of the Labor, HHS, Education spending bill is approximately \$3 billion short of meeting the pledge.

“As Fiscal Year 2006 (FY06) winds down, we remain particularly concerned about the final funding level for the FY07 Labor, HHS, Education Appropriations bill, which the House has not yet considered,” the letter reads. “We are writing to respectfully remind you of the agreement to provide no less than \$7 billion above the [president’s budget] request. ... We strongly support fulfilling this agreement before the end of the legislative year.”

In addition to the disagreement over spending, the House bill also contains a provision that would increase the minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25 by January 2009. This issue is a big one for many moderate Republicans, several of whom are facing heated reelection contests. However, it now appears that they can avoid casting a vote on the issue until after the election.

Although the Senate version of the bill does not contain the minimum wage increase, a similar debate over spending levels has held up the bill’s consideration. In March, the Senate passed an amendment by **Senators Arlen Specter (R-PA)** and **Tom Harkin (D-IA)**, **the chairman and ranking member, respectively, of the Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee**, which added \$7 billion to the pool of money

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available for the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, and Labor. The amendment, which enjoyed considerable bipartisan support, passed on a 73–27 vote.

In July, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved a bill that would provide the U.S. Department of Education with \$55.8 billion in discretionary spending for FY 2007, a decrease of \$150 million from last year and a cut of \$780 million from FY 2005—the high watermark for federal education funding. During that markup, Senator Specter criticized the lack of funds for domestic priorities. He said that the bill “[constitutes] what I view as really the disintegration of the appropriate federal role in health, education, and worker protections.”

Earlier this month, Senators Specter and Harkin began circulating a letter to Senate and Appropriations Committee leaders asking for the full funding committed to in March. At the end of last week, fifty-two senators, including ten Republicans, had signed onto the letter.

“Millions of needy American families and students rely on the vital services and assistance funded through the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill,” the letter reads. “We feel strongly that the funding we provide in this bill reflects an investment in the human infrastructure of our nation. At a time when the demand for job training and education is critical to maintain America’s competitiveness, and when the cost of health care and access to quality care are major issues for many Americans, we simply cannot afford to cut funding for health care and education. These cuts move our country in the wrong direction.”

### **Looking Ahead: Flurry of Action Possible After Election Day**

With the stopgap spending resolution, also called a continuing resolution, set to expire on November 17, Congress will need to return after the election and make a final decision on the ten spending bills that have yet to be signed into law.<sup>1</sup> While many observers believe that the education bill will be combined with bills for other agencies as part of a larger “omnibus” spending bill, **House Appropriations Committee Chairman Jerry Lewis (R-CA)** and **Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Thad Cochran (R-MS)** have said that they would prefer to move bills individually.

Last week, House Majority Leader Boehner said that he would like to complete any unfinished appropriations work during the lame-duck session in November. “We have got to have some answers on how we complete the appropriations process,” he said. “I do not want the appropriations process to carry over into next year; it just delays action on next year’s work.”

House Democrats were quick to criticize the decision to delay action on the remainder of the appropriations bills until after the election. “They prefer to push it past the election so that there will be no accountability for most of the actions taken by Congress on the domestic portion of the budget,” said **House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey (D-WI)**.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the spending bill for the Department of Defense, Congress passed the Homeland Security spending bill last week.

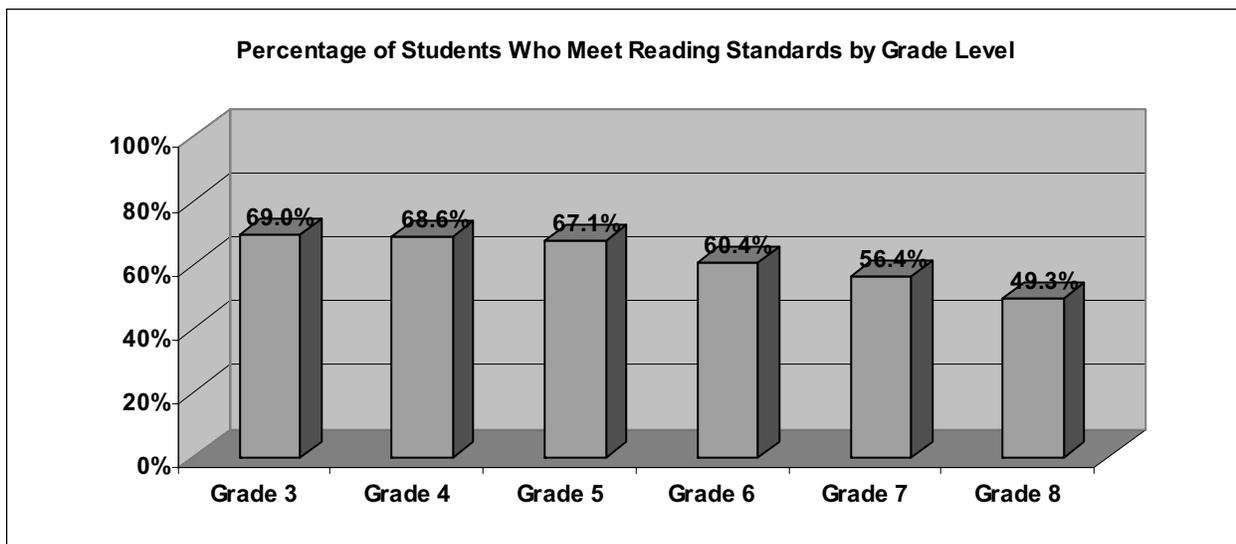


## “THE PROBLEM IS LITERACY IN THE MIDDLE GRADES”: Sharp Drop in Reading Scores After Fifth Grade Leads to Concern in New York State

New York students posted relatively high scores in reading and writing in the elementary grades, but scores dropped dramatically after the fifth grade, according to the results from a new comprehensive testing system that the state adopted last year. The state developed the new test in an effort to comply with the No Child Left Behind Act’s requirement that students be tested every year in grades 3 through 8. Combined with the state’s new individual student data system, the new tests will allow schools to track students from grade-to-grade and to compare student performance from year-to-year. In the past, New York only tested students in grades 4 and 8.

According to an article in the *New York Times*, student performance on these past tests should have served as a harbinger of the disappointing scores on this year’s test. “The pattern of relatively good performance at the elementary level and lackluster results in middle school had been apparent in the annual fourth- and eighth-grade exams, which New York administered from 1999 until last year,” the article reads. “While fourth graders posted big gains, with 70.4 percent on grade in 2005, up from 48 percent in 1999, eighth-grade scores were flat and unimpressive at 48.1 percent over the same time period.”

In past years, state officials explained away low eighth-grade scores by stressing that students were required to demonstrate mastery on more complex subjects. This year, however, test results demonstrated a steady decline in test scores, with a significant drop off after grade 5 that state officials could not ignore. In an ironic twist, a higher percentage of eighth-grade students (49.3 percent) met standards this year than they did last year (48.1 percent) when state officials were reluctant to sound the alarm.



“Despite improvements in elementary school over the past several years, the Grade 3–8 results show substantially lower achievement starting in the sixth grade,” said **Richard Mills, state education commissioner for New York**. “The problem is literacy in the middle grades. These results demand improvement in curriculum, instruction, and professional development.”

## Sharp Drop in Reading Scores After Fifth Grade Leads to Concern in New York State

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At a press conference announcing the test results, Mills said that there was a “widespread and dangerous slacking off in literacy instruction beginning in the fifth grade at many schools throughout the state,” as reported by the *New York Times*. “[Students] certainly are not learning to read in a powerful way; they certainly are not learning to write as they should. Adult literacy scores are too low, but this is where it begins. . . . We have to do something different. We have to change our tactics, our curriculum, our approach.”

Mills said that the New York State Board of Regents was considering several new actions to improve students’ reading performance. Specifically, he said that new teachers—especially in elementary and middle schools—needed to know how to teach reading. In addition, he said that current teachers should have adequate professional development on how to teach reading and that scientifically based reading strategies should be available and used in low-performing schools. For students, Mills said that more intensive classes should be made available to underserved students to ensure that they learn how to read. He added that all students should read 25 books a year and write 1,000 words a month.

More information on the results, including Commissioner Mills’ press release and a PowerPoint presentation, is available at <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/press-release/20060921/home.htm>.

### **IES Accepting Grant Proposals on Interventions for Struggling Adolescent and Adult Readers and Writers**

A significant number of adolescent and adult readers cannot read well enough to make sense of short passages, much less the longer stretches of text that most readers are expected to understand everyday. In fact, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 27 percent of eighth graders and 26 percent of twelfth graders read significantly below grade level. Research has shown that adolescents who are struggling readers are at high risk of dropping out of high school without a diploma, graduating unprepared for college, and having limited opportunities in the workforce.

Through its Research on Interventions for Struggling Adolescent and Adult Readers and Writers grants program, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education, is now accepting grant applications for reading and writing interventions and assessments that are designed to improve the outcomes for these individuals. The IES defines struggling adolescent readers as middle or high school students who have not been identified with learning disabilities, but whose reading or writing skills are at least two years below grade level. In defining struggling adult readers and writers, the Institute means adults whose reading and writing skills prevent them from carrying out simple daily tasks.

In awarding grants, the IES hopes to be able to support the identification, development, and validation of approaches that can improve the outcomes of struggling adolescent and adult readers and writers. Its long-term goal is to develop an array of tools and strategies that have been deemed effective for improving the reading and writing skills of struggling readers and writers.

The IES is particularly interested in research efforts targeting adolescents and adults who may be able to read and write, but whose performance level impedes their success either in the classroom or in the workplace.

More information about program guidelines, as well as a grant application for download, is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncer/funding/research/intervention/intervention.asp>.



## **NOT READY FOR PRIME TIME: Latest Test Results in California Show 75 Percent of High School Juniors Are Not College Ready**

Three in four high school juniors in California are not ready for college-level English classes, according to the latest results on the Early Assessment Program (EAP), a voluntary test designed by California State University (CSU) officials that identifies whether high school students are prepared for university-level coursework. Students fared a better in math, with more than half deemed “college ready.”

**California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell** issued a statement that focused on the higher numbers of students taking the test but that did not comment on the results themselves. “The fact that so many students are thinking about going to college is very encouraging,” O’Connell said. “Ultimately, the success of this program will hinge on the extent to which students’ senior year is used more effectively so that greater numbers of students are ready for college after high school.”

Based on the test results, 55 percent of test-takers are considered ready for college-level math, a decline of one percentage point from last year. Test administrators blamed the decrease on the larger pool of test-takers and did not view it as significant.

On the English test, initial results showed only 25 percent of students scoring at the proficient level, the determiner of “college ready” status. While this is an increase of 1 percent over last year, it is nevertheless a particularly disappointing result, especially as the test is voluntary and most of the test-takers are likely to be higher-performing students who plan to attend college.

An additional 60,000 English tests have yet to be graded because of confusing instructions that were given to students. Test instructions had required that students fill in a bubble on their essay booklet if they intended to complete the English portion of the test. When it was discovered that 60,000 booklets had answers for that section, but did not have the bubble filled in, the decision was made to reexamine all test booklets, and to score any essays that had not been scored in the first round. These results are expected in October. Once these tests are added to those scored in the first round, officials estimate that over 200,000 high school juniors will have taken the EAP in English, a significant increase from the 186,000 high school juniors who took the EAP in English last year, but still only 48 percent of all high school juniors. **CSU spokeswoman Claudia Keith** could not say with certainty why so many students did not take the tests but presumed that many of those who opted out were not college bound.

CSU officials developed the test after recognizing that nearly half of the incoming college freshmen in fall 2003 were not proficient in English, and nearly 40 percent were not proficient in math. At the time, CSU officials estimated that they spent close to \$30 million annually on remedial courses in math and English. Questions on the test were developed by CSU faculty who wanted to test students on geometry, algebra II, and writing skills in greater depth than the statewide assessment.

Officials hope that by identifying learning gaps during the junior year, students can improve their performance during their senior year. CSU leaders have also pledged to work with high school

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teachers to align more closely what students learn in high school and what they need to know to succeed at the college level. In addition, CSU faculty have also created a senior-level English class that focuses on critical thinking and writing, as an alternative to current courses that center on literature but often lack a component to teach the skills needed for college-level writing.

More information on the test results is available at <http://www.calstate.edu/eap/testing.shtml>.



### **WE'RE NUMBER...SIX?: United States Drops from Number One to Number Six in Global Competitiveness Rankings**

Previously number one in the world, the United States fell five places in the 2006–07 competitiveness rankings of the World Economic Forum (WEF). The rankings are based on the WEF's Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), which considers the factors that are critical to driving productivity and competitiveness. It groups these factors into a number of categories: institutions, infrastructure, macroeconomy, health and primary education, higher education and training, market efficiency, technological readiness, business sophistication, and innovation.

#### **Top Ten Countries by GCI**

<b>Country</b>	<b>GCI 2006 Rank</b>	<b>GCI Score</b>	<b>GCI 2005 Rank</b>
Switzerland	1	5.81	4
Finland	2	5.76	2
Sweden	3	5.74	7
Denmark	4	5.70	3
Singapore	5	5.63	5
<b>United States</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5.61</b>	<b>1</b>
Japan	7	5.60	10
Germany	8	5.58	6
Netherlands	9	5.56	11
United Kingdom	10	5.54	9

Among the top ten countries, the report credits Switzerland's "combination of a world-class capacity for innovation and the presence of a highly sophisticated business culture" for its top ranking. The Nordic countries in positions two, three, and four benefit from their budget surpluses and low levels of public indebtedness. Finland and Sweden also occupy places in the top ten in health and primary education. The United States receives strong marks for its market efficiency, innovation, higher education and training, and business sophistication.

Singapore, Japan, and Hong Kong (11<sup>th</sup>) get credit for their high-quality infrastructures, flexible and efficient markets, and healthy, well-educated workforces. The report also singles out India (43<sup>rd</sup>) for the quality of its scientific research and for the number of its scientists and engineers but notes that its secondary and tertiary school enrollment rates are low by international standards.

The United States ranked 40<sup>th</sup> in health and primary education and 5<sup>th</sup> in higher education and training. The top five countries in health and primary education were Japan, Canada, Iceland, Denmark, and Spain.

More information on the report is available at <http://www.weforum.org/en/initiatives/gcp/Global%20Competitiveness%20Report/index.htm>.



### **WINDOWS ON CONVERSIONS: New Toolkit Provides Educators with a First-Hand Look at School Redesign**

A new tool kit from the School Redesign Network at Stanford University provides educators with an up-close account of successful school redesigns currently underway in four high schools across the country. The kit, *Windows on Conversions: A Multi-Media Exploration of Redesign at Four Comprehensive High Schools*, features an interactive DVD, case studies of the schools, and a facilitators' guide. It uses conversations with teachers, administrators, parents, and students to convey the challenges facing comprehensive high schools as they convert to small schools and small learning communities.

“Small learning communities by themselves are not enough to improve learning and close the achievement gap,” said **Linda Darling-Hammond, Stanford University professor of education, SRN co-director, and a member of the Alliance for Excellent Education’s board of directors**. “However, redesigning high schools can be a first step in creating an environment in which diverse students can reach their potential. Collectively, these four schools represent many of the critical organizational and instructional changes needed to create high schools that work.”

SRN argues that promising school reform efforts are often stymied by the impersonal, factory-model school. Instead, it favors the small school approach and points to research that has found that—all else equal—small schools produce higher achievement, lower dropout rates, greater attachment, and more participation in the curricular and extracurricular activities that prepare students for productive lives.

It has identified ten features that good small schools should have to help all students succeed academically, graduate at high levels, and go on to college. Some examples of these features are personalization, continuous relationships, authentic curriculum with real-world connections, qualified teachers, and time for teachers to work together and develop their expertise.

More information on SRN, including ordering information for the kit, is available at <http://schoolredesign.net>.

***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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