



StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



DEMOCRATS SWEEP INTO POWER: Will Post-Election Pledges of Bipartisanship Apply When Congress Meets For Its Lame Duck Session?

The dramatic tidal wave that swept Democrats into power in the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives also appears to have washed away some of the partisan bickering that has plagued Washington, DC for the last few years. Whether the collegiality and compromise that emerged post-election will continue into the lame duck session of Congress during the week of November 13 remains to be seen.

“The message [on Election Day] was clear,” President Bush said. “The American people want their leaders in Washington to set aside partisan differences, conduct ourselves in an ethical manner, and work together to address the challenges facing our nation.”

House Minority Leader and Speaker-to-be Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) echoed the president’s comments after meeting with him on November 9. “I look forward to working in a confidence-building way with the President, recognizing that we have our differences and we will debate them, and that is what our founders intended,” she said. “But we will do so in a way that gets results for the American people.”

With a gain of at least twenty-eight seats in the House of Representatives and a six-seat gain in the U.S. Senate, Democrats will take over control of both chambers of Congress when they return in mid-January. For the time being, however, Congress still needs to act on the ten outstanding spending bills that will fund the government in 2007, including the one that funds the U.S. Department of Education. Currently, the government is operating on a continuing resolution, or stopgap spending measure, that expires on November 17.

While most of the country’s attention has been focused on the Democratic majorities that will control Congress in January, it is important to remember that Republicans will continue to dictate the legislative agenda for the remainder of the year. Congress returns on November 13.

In October, **House Majority Leader John Boehner (R-OH)** expressed a desire to finish action on the spending bills during the lame duck session. “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.” Of course, that statement was made before Republicans knew that they would be the minority party in January. Now, many observers expect lawmakers to clear another short-term continuing resolution that extends into January and to leave the spending bills to the new Congress. That’s what occurred in 2002, when the Senate flipped to Republican control.

Democrats Sweep Into Power

(Continued from p. 1)

There is the possibility that Congress could enact an omnibus bill that wraps several of the unfinished spending bills into one piece of legislation to be sent to the president, but that will require Republicans and Democrats to act on the bipartisan rhetoric that has emerged after the election. “If the Democratic leadership says we want to get this stuff done now and we don’t want it on our desk, that would be positive, in that maybe we could wrap it up into an omnibus [appropriations] bill,” said **G. William Hoagland, budget advisor to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN)**.

A senior Democratic appropriations aide cautioned, however, that while Democrats would probably prefer to get the bills finished, they would want to pass bills under circumstances they could live with. The aide said that it was still likely that Democrats would press for the additional \$7 billion in funding for health, education, and labor programs that was agreed to earlier in the year.

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 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 May, Republican House moderates received a pledge from Boehner for an additional \$7 billion for the Departments of Labor, HHS, and Education in exchange for their support on the congressional budget resolution. In recent months, however, it has seemed likely that the additional funds would be less than promised.

As reported in *CQ Today*, Hoagland said that GOP leaders and the White House would probably oppose any demands from Democrats that they bust budget caps to add billions in spending for domestic programs. For his part, the senior Democratic appropriations aide said that other options could be employed to offset the funding, including advanced appropriations or designating some spending as “emergency,” so that it would not count against budget caps.



DOUBLE THE WORK: New Alliance Report Calls for Increased Focus on English Language Learners in Discussions on Improving Adolescent Literacy

A new report by the Alliance for Excellent Education finds that the nation’s growing English language learner (ELL) populations, which increased by more than 65 percent between 1994 and 2004, have been largely ignored as policymakers consider ways to improve adolescent reading and writing proficiency levels.

Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners, a report to Carnegie Corporation of New York, argues that this rising number of immigrants and the demands of an increasingly global economy make it clear that the nation can no longer afford to ignore the pressing needs of ELL students, who must work twice as hard to meet the same accountability standards as their native English-speaking peers. It contends that the unique needs of ELL students must be identified and

addressed with targeted strategies if the reading and writing skills of all middle and high school students are to improve.

“The ELL population is growing rapidly across the country, and these are students at serious risk of dropping out of high school,” said **Bob Wise, former governor of West Virginia and president of the Alliance for Excellent Education**. “They require support and resources that reflect their language challenges, their diversity, and the fact that they have to work even harder than native English speakers to achieve a high school diploma. They have unique challenges that call for special solutions. We know how to help them—now we have to do it.”

Currently, 31 percent of ELLs fail to graduate from high school, compared to only 10 percent of young adults who speak English at home. In addition, only 4 percent of eighth-grade ELLs and 20 percent of students classified as “formerly ELL” scored at the proficient or advanced levels on the reading portion of the 2005 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). More than 70 percent of ELL students scored below basic on NAEP.

Low graduation rates among ELL students are especially troubling considering that, in virtually every part of the country, middle and high schools are experiencing expanding enrollments of students whose primary language is not English. In fact, 14 states saw their percentages of limited English proficient students (LEP) grow by more than 200 percent from 1993 to 2003. According to the report, this rapid growth raises important questions about whether states have the resources (e.g., trained teachers, language support programs, curricula, and materials) and infrastructures to accommodate these students and the ability to ensure that the children have appropriate and effective academic and language instruction.

Authored by **Dr. Deborah J. Short** and **Shannon Fitzsimmons of the Center for Applied Linguistics**, and informed by a distinguished panel of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, *Double the Work* discusses the diversity of the English language learner populations in American secondary schools and recommends techniques to improve the way they are taught. It cautions that the same literacy interventions will not necessarily work for both native English speakers and ELL students. And because adolescent ELLs enter schools with different levels of literacy proficiency, both in English and in their native language, there is no simple, one-size-fits-all solution to the literacy challenges that confront them. However, the report does recommend an array of different strategies for surmounting the six challenges it identifies to improving literacy development among ELLs.

One challenge is the lack of a uniform national definition for what constitutes an ELL student. Without this information, it is very difficult to determine precisely who these students are, how well they are doing academically, and what kinds of services they need. To help with this problem, the report recommends common criteria for identifying these learners and for tracking their performance. As an example, it lists the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment Consortium (WIDA), which consists of fifteen partner states and jurisdictions that are developing common definitions that could serve as a model for the nation.

Double the Work also laments the lack of appropriate assessments for ELL students—a deficiency that is especially important given the No Child Left Behind Act’s requirement that

Double the Work (Continued from p. 3)

ELL students make progress in meeting academic standards and in becoming fully proficient in English. Unfortunately, the standardized tests that are used to measure academic knowledge are not sensitive to second language literacy development. Far too often, low test scores are perceived as a lack of mastery of the content, rather than as the normal pace of the second language acquisition process. To gauge a student's progress more effectively, the report calls for a diagnostic evaluation before a student enters a program and additional assessments at regular intervals.

The report also seeks to build capacity among preservice and current educators to instruct these learners effectively. Currently, many of the educators working in secondary schools have had little professional development for teaching literacy to adolescents. Fewer still have had training to teach second language literacy to adolescent ELLs. Among its recommendations, the report says that teachers need professional development to teach content effectively to students who are learning academic English at the same time that they are trying to meet content standards. It notes that only three states (Arizona, California, and Florida) have enacted policies to ensure that teacher candidates have some preservice courses that will help them work successfully with ELLs.

The report also calls for flexible secondary school programs that offer time and course work that take into account the second language development process. It notes that finding an appropriate program that will accelerate students' English language development and let them make progress in content-area course work is the ultimate goal. In addition, the report recommends a wider and more consistent use of research-based instructional practices and more short- and long-term research on new and existing interventions and programs and on the academic performance of these adolescent ELLs.

“Adolescent ELLs are a diverse group of students whose needs, overall, have not been well served by the country's educational system,” the report concludes. “Yet with programs targeted to their language development needs, they can be successful in learning English and the content of their secondary school courses. . . . By helping ELLs learn and perform more effectively in the nation's schools, America's educational system and society as a whole will be strengthened and enriched.”

The complete report is available at
<http://www.all4ed.org/publications/DoubleWork/DoubleWork.pdf>.



RECLAIMING THE AMERICAN DREAM: Report Finds Rigorous High School Course Work and a “College-Going Culture” Vital to Success in College

Academic preparation is by far the most effective way to increase the odds that a student will graduate from high school prepared for college and eventually receive his or her college degree, according to a *Reclaiming the American Dream*, a new report from the Bridgespan Group that was supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

“Education is our most critical tool for increasing economic opportunity and social mobility,” said **Susan Colby, Bridgespan Group partner and co-author of the report**. “Through this paper we sought to identify the barriers that keep students from earning degrees, and to make recommendations that will help the appropriate actors set priorities and make choices on how to best prepare students for college. All students deserve the opportunity not just to finish high school, but to achieve their aspirations.”

The report finds that students who graduate from high school having met “even a very lenient definition of academic preparedness” have an 85 percent chance of going to college and a 50 percent chance of earning a degree.¹ On the other hand, students who fail to meet this standard have only a 14 percent chance of finishing college. According to the report, only 46 percent of high school graduates meet even minimal levels of academic preparation. In particular, it cites research that found the “tipping point of momentum towards a bachelor’s degree [is] now firmly above Algebra 2.”

In addition to academic preparation, the report identified several other factors that increase a student’s chance of earning a college degree. For example, students who expect that a college degree will be essential to pursue their desired careers are six times more likely to earn a degree. In addition, students who are well informed about the course requirements they need to enroll in college are more likely to be successful. As the report points out, many low-income students have the expectation that they will go to college but lack access to rigorous courses and lag far behind in taking advanced math and science. Having a cohort of friends who expect to go to college is also important—even more so than parental encouragement. The report adds that supports that address the issue of college affordability are “important across the board.”

Among its recommendations, the report supports a challenging high school curriculum and high school exit requirements that are aligned with college entrance requirements. To help students meet these higher standards, schools need to provide additional supports such as tutoring for students and professional development for teachers to “create the conditions for rigorous programs to be successful.”

Reclaiming the American Dream calls for “college-going cultures” in all high schools where students have a clear understanding of the relevance of college and are surrounded by high expectations for success. It also encourages students to challenge misperceptions about college affordability. “Studies show that many students falsely assume that they cannot afford college,” it reads. “Half to three-quarters of low-income students do not apply for aid or loans. Changing this perception and connecting students with financial help greatly improves their chances of entering college and earning a degree.”

The complete report is available at <http://www.bridgespan.org/PDF/ReclaimingtheAmerican%20DreamWhitePaper.pdf>.

¹ According to the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), which the Bridgespan Group analyzed in writing the report, students are defined as “minimally qualified” for college if they meet one of five criteria: 1) Rank at or above the 54th percentile in their class; 2) Have a GPA of 2.7 or higher in academic courses; 3) Have a combined SAT score of 820 or above (approximately the 35th percentile); 4) Have an ACT composite score of 19 or higher (approximately the 40th percentile); or 5) Score at the 56th percentile or above on the 1992 NELS math and reading composite aptitude test.



EDUCATION SECRETARY ANNOUNCES \$42 MILLION IN TEACHER PAY FOR PERFORMANCE GRANTS

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings recently announced the award of \$42 million for sixteen grants that will provide financial incentives to teachers and principals who improve student achievement in high-poverty schools. The grants will also be used to recruit effective teachers to those schools, particularly for hard-to-staff subjects such as math and science.

“Nothing helps a child learn as much as a great teacher—and research shows that rewarding teachers for results can improve student performance,” Spellings said. “Great teachers who work in schools where they are badly needed deserve more than our thanks. I am pleased to announce these Teacher Incentive Fund grants, which will encourage and reward more experienced teachers for working at high-poverty schools where they can make a real difference in raising student achievement.”

The grants are a part of President Bush’s new Teacher Incentive Fund, which received \$99 million in FY 2006. The program is designed to develop and implement performance-based teacher and principal compensation systems in high-need, disadvantaged schools, where at least 30 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

The remaining \$43.1 million in grants is expected to be awarded in spring 2007. According to an article in *Education Week*, many of the more than 60 applications the U.S. Department of Education received needed improvement. “We thought the best thing to do was hold another competition to make sure all grantees are of the highest quality,” **Amanda Farris, a deputy assistant secretary in the office of elementary and secondary education**, said in the article. Applicants who were not approved in the first cycle will get technical assistance from the department in putting together their applications for the spring grants.

Around the country, several states, including Texas, Florida, and North Carolina, have implemented programs that tie teacher pay to performance. However, opponents generally believe that merit pay could be divisive and cause animosity between teachers who received bonuses and those who did not. Others stress that more money is needed to lift the salaries of all teachers, not just a select few.

The Teacher Incentive Fund, in particular, has drawn the ire of **Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association (NEA)**, who considers the program “unnecessary and duplicative.” Instead, the NEA would like to see the money diverted to other teacher programs, such as the Title II Teacher Quality State Grants.

“Paying teachers based on the test results of their students has failed for many reasons,” he said. “Students learn best when teachers work as a team, not as free agents competing for a financial reward. These grants will promote unhealthy competition in a profession that thrives on teamwork and collaboration. Real learning is the casualty when teachers shift their focus from quality instruction to boosting test scores.”

While most teacher unions oppose merit pay and other pay-for-performance measures for teachers, pay-for-performance programs in Denver and Minneapolis were adopted with the support and help of local teacher unions.

More information on the Teacher Incentive Program, as well as a complete list of the sixteen grantees, is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2006/11/11032006.html>.

Pew Launches Campaign to Strengthen Community-Driven Dropout Prevention

On October 25, the Pew Partnership for Civic Change launched *Ready to Learn*, a multiyear national initiative to combat America's high school dropout crisis. The community-focused campaign will initially target two cities and their environs—Shreveport, LA and Jacksonville, FL—before expanding to twenty-three other yet-to-be-determined locations next year.

“Pew’s concept is that this is not only an education problem, [but also] it’s a community problem,” **Paula Hickman, executive director of the Community Foundation of Shreveport-Bossier**, told the *Shreveport Times*. “We need to have a broad-based group who can help identify not only the issues but [also] help find solutions.”

The initiative will provide partner communities with tools to measure their local situation and to evaluate schools’ progress and will focus much of its energy on middle-school students’ transition to high school.

Accompanying the launch, the Pew Partnership has released a community discussion guide titled *Learning to Finish: The High School Dropout Crisis*. The guide’s main audience comprises concerned citizens who might drive communitywide efforts, and it aims to “bridge research and practice” and to identify “key elements in successful community-organized efforts to deal with the dropout problem.”

The guide also diagnoses the dropout crisis’ national consequences in terms of the America’s economic future and the achievement gap. It goes on to advocate for community-driven approaches nationwide and spotlights several success stories; it also defines key elements for community efforts that will drive *Learning to Finish*.

In addition, as part of the initiative, Pew has launched a best-practices “dropout wiki,” funded by the Knight Foundation’s New Voices program and administered by J-Lab. A *wiki* is a website that allows registered users to add and edit content, functioning as an open-source encyclopedia of relevant information. Pew hopes the *wiki* will serve as a hub of information for communities and individuals across the nation.

Articles in the *wiki* are organized under the rubrics of Program Case Studies, Background Reading, and a compendium of online links. Current content is limited and focused on to the resources and studies which informed the initiative’s development and discussion guide, with consistent encouragement for readers to add materials.

More information about *Learning to Finish* and instructions for downloading or ordering the discussion guide can be found at <http://www.pew-partnership.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:

- **Democrats Sweep Into Power: Will Post-Election Pledges of Bipartisanship Apply When Congress Meets For Its Lame Duck Session?**
- *Double the Work*: New Alliance Report Calls for Increased Focus on English Language Learners in Discussions on Improving Adolescent Literacy
- *Reclaiming the American Dream*: Report Finds Rigorous High School Course Work and a “College-Going Culture” Vital to Success in College
- Education Secretary Announces \$42 Million in Teacher Pay for Performance Grants



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