



# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## CONGRESS RETURNS BRIEFLY, POSTPONES DECISION ON EDUCATION SPENDING

Members of Congress returned to Capitol Hill during the week of November 13 to hold leadership elections and continue unfinished work on FY 2007 spending bills. While Democrats and Republicans were able to enact their respective leadership structures for the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress (see box below), they made little progress on the ten appropriations bills that have yet to be signed into law. Instead, Congress passed another stopgap spending measure, or continuing resolution, that will fund governmental agencies through December 8.

After a two-week break for Thanksgiving, lawmakers will return to Washington, DC during the week of December 4 to resume negotiations on the remaining spending bills. At that point, a decision will need to be made on whether to punt spending decisions to 2007—a time when Democrats will control both chambers of Congress—or to package the remaining spending bills into an omnibus bill or several “minibuses.”

“You can’t ask the staff to work through Christmas,” said **Senator Judd Gregg (R-NH)**, a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee. “It’s not fair to them. So I think that at some point you just plain run out of time, and you have to go to a [continuing] resolution.”

Currently, the House of Representatives has passed all but one of its appropriations bills—the Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education bill—but the Senate has only passed two: Defense and Homeland Security. If Congress decides to enact a continuing resolution that will fund programs into the new year, it will likely adjourn by December 8. Otherwise, legislators will remain in Washington, DC until the middle of December or beyond.

### Congressional Leadership Elections: Pelosi to Become First Woman Speaker of the House

In a unanimous vote by her Democratic colleagues, **Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)** was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives. **Representative Steny Hoyer (D-MD)** was elected House majority leader and **Representative James Clyburn (D-SC)** was elected House majority whip. For Republicans, **Representative John Boehner (R-OH)** will serve as House minority leader while **Representative Roy Blunt (R-MO)** will be House minority whip.

In the Senate, **Senators Harry Reid (D-NV)** and **Richard Durbin (D-IL)** will continue to lead the Democratic Party, but this time as majority leader and majority whip, respectively. **Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY)** will replace retiring **Senator Bill Frist (R-TN)** as the leader of the Republican Party as Senate minority leader while **Senator Trent Lott (R-MS)** will act as Senate minority whip.

## **U.S. Chamber of Commerce Survey Finds Overwhelming Support for Extending NCLB into High Schools**

The requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) should be extended to high schools. So say over 85 percent of the respondents to a recent survey by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The survey reflects the opinions of 571 business organizations that responded to the survey.

When asked for their opinion about the rigor of the curriculum in U.S. schools, less than one third said that the current curriculum offered in schools is rigorous, and over half (53 percent) said that the current curriculum in K–12 classrooms does not adequately prepare students for college and the workforce.

When discussing what could be done to improve schools, 35 percent of respondents believe that *only* additional reforms are needed to improve the educational system, and 46 percent say that additional reforms *and* funding are necessary. However, over 60 percent say that currently available money is not well spent to improve low-performing schools.

Respondents offered support for many of the provisions in NCLB. For example, 77 percent agree with NCLB’s requirement that school systems restructure failing schools; 76 percent support NCLB’s requirement that school systems provide tutoring services; and 74 percent agree that school systems should be required to offer students the ability to transfer to a higher-performing school outside the school district in which they live. Support for vouchers, however, was mixed, with 53 percent favoring vouchers and an additional 15 percent supporting vouchers only as a last resort.

Respondents “consistently agree” that teacher quality is a key factor in students’ academic development, with 75 percent saying that good teachers can close the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their higher-income peers. However, they are also skeptical about teachers’ preparation both before and after they enter a classroom. Approximately 25 percent say that teachers use the best research available to design instruction that helps students improve their academic achievement, and only 27 percent feel that postsecondary institutions are preparing teachers to be effective. As an incentive to recruit and retain more teachers, respondents support pay-for-performance for teachers whose students improve in their academic achievement.

The complete survey is available at [http://www.uschamber.com/publications/reports/education\\_reform.htm](http://www.uschamber.com/publications/reports/education_reform.htm).

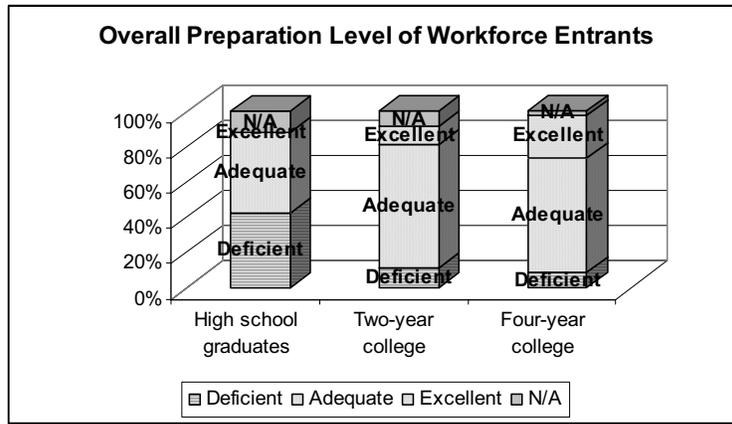


## ***ARE THEY REALLY READY TO WORK?: Survey of Employers Reveals Dissatisfaction with Skills of Recent High School Graduates***

Over 40 percent of recent high school graduates are not sufficiently prepared for jobs after high school. So says *Are They Really Ready to Work?: Employers’ Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century U.S. Workforce*, a new report based on a detailed survey of 431 human resource professionals. The report, which also surveyed employers’ opinions of college graduates, reveals frustration among employers at the lack of preparedness of all new workforce entrants—both high school graduates and two- and four-year college graduates.

“This study should serve as an alert to educators, policymakers, and those concerned with U.S. economic competitiveness that we may be facing a skills shortage,” said **Susan R. Meisinger, president and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)**. The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, and the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills joined SHRM in conducting the survey.

As shown in the chart below, 42 percent of employer respondents said that new entrants with a high school diploma were “deficient” in their overall preparation for the entry-level jobs that they typically fill. Another 46 percent said that recent high school graduates were “adequate,” but almost no one (0.2 percent) rated their overall preparation as “excellent.”



But do college graduates fare any better in their employers’ eyes? According to the report, incoming two-year and four-year college graduates are much better prepared for the entry-level jobs they seek to fill, but deficiencies still exist—10.8 percent of two-year college graduates were rated as deficient, compared to 8.7 percent of four-year college graduates. Meanwhile, just over 70 percent of two-year graduates and 64.5 percent of four-year college graduates were rated as “adequately” prepared for the jobs they fill. However, relatively small percentages of college-educated students meet standards of excellence, as only 10.3 percent and 23.9 percent of two-year and four-year college-educated entrants were deemed “excellent” in terms of their overall preparation.

In addition to overall performance, the survey also queried employers about workforce entrants’ “basic skills,” such as reading, writing, and mathematics. Again, employers gave low marks. As shown in the chart below, employers surveyed were especially discouraged with the writing skills of recent high school graduates, saying that 72 percent of incoming high school graduates were “deficient” in basic English writing skills, including grammar and spelling. This finding is especially disturbing considering that approximately half (49.4 percent) of all employers surveyed said that basic writing skills are “very important” in the jobs they are trying to fill.

### Recent High School Graduates’ Performance in the Three Rs

Subject Area	Rating by Employers			“Very important” for successful job performance
	Deficient	Adequate	Excellent	
Writing in English	72.0%	27.1%	0.8%	49.4%
Mathematics	53.5%	45.1%	1.5%	30.4%
Reading Comprehension	38.4%	58.2%	3.4%	62.5%

Similar to their high school counterparts, high percentages of college graduates were deemed deficient in writing skills by the employers who hired them. In fact, 46.4 percent of employer respondents say that workforce entrants with a two-year college education are deficient and 26.2 percent say the same thing about four-year college graduates. Again, writing skills were deemed very important by employers; 64.9 percent ranked those skills as “very important” to the jobs

## **Are They Really Ready to Work?** (Continued from p. 3)

that two-year college graduates hold and 89.7 percent saying that it is very important for four-year college graduates to be skilled in writing.

When asked about recent high school graduates' "applied skills," in written communication, work ethic, and critical thinking, employers were even less generous with their marks. In written communications (writing memos, letters, complex reports), 81 percent of employers said that recent graduates were deficient. Only 19 percent said they were adequate. In the survey, employers expressed frustration with frequent spelling errors, improper use of grammar, and the misuse of words in written reports, PowerPoint presentations, and email messages. Similarly, 69.6 percent of employers said that recent high school graduates were deficient in critical thinking and problem solving skills and that 70.3 percent were deficient in work ethic (personal accountability, punctuality, etc.).

"To succeed in today's workplace, young people need more than basic reading and math skills," **J. Willard Marriott, Jr., chairman and CEO of Marriott International Inc.**, said in the report. "They need substantial content knowledge and information technology skills; advanced thinking skills, flexibility to adapt to change; and interpersonal skills to succeed in multi-cultural, cross-functional teams."

According to the report, very few recent high school graduates fit Mr. Marriott's description. As a result, many employers say that they will look to better educated individuals when filling job openings in the future. In fact, 28 percent say that their companies will reduce hiring new entrants with only a high school diploma over the next five years while nearly 50 percent say the percentages of two-year college graduates they hire will increase, and 60 percent say that they will increase their hires of four-year college graduates.

In order to better prepare recent graduates of all types for work, the report recommends that all stakeholders (businesses, educators, and community members) consider methods of enhancing important workplace skills. It suggests internships, summer jobs, work-study programs, job shadowing, and other educational approaches that "include real-world experiences or community involvement, provide opportunities for students to acquire basic knowledge and skills, while cultivating applied skills." It also recommends that employers and academics work together to make instruction meaningful and internships relevant to workplace needs.

The report includes a Report Card on Workforce Readiness that presents the "very important" skills as defined by a majority of employer respondents for each of the educational levels considered in the study. The report card contains two lists, one for excellence and one for deficiency. To be placed on either list, a specific "very important" skill must have at least 20 percent of employer responses reporting new entrants' readiness in that skill as excellent or deficient. According to the report, the top three basic skills that employers value are reading comprehension, English language speaking skills, and writing skills. The top three applied skills that they value the most are professionalism/work ethic, teamwork/collaboration, and oral communications.

The complete report is available at  
[http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/documents/FINAL\\_REPORT\\_PDF9-29-06.pdf](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/documents/FINAL_REPORT_PDF9-29-06.pdf).



## **WHERE AMERICA STANDS: Report Finds that the U.S. Educational System Fails to Meet the Needs of a Globally Competitive Economy**

Since 1986, the United States has nearly doubled its Gross Domestic Product and today remains the world's largest economy, according to *Competitiveness Index: Where America Stands*, a new report from the Council on Competitiveness that includes a special section on education. However, while America has among the highest levels of productivity and standard of living, the report identifies adequately educating its workforce as a serious area of concern.

“In an economy where technical change is one of the major drivers of growth, and where lower-wage workers in emerging markets are increasingly able to compete directly for work that once could be done only in America, the demand for more skills—higher educational attainment and higher-order competencies in communication and expert thinking—has risen rapidly,” the report reads. “Despite decades of focus on this issue and progress in some areas, the U.S. educational system still fails to meet the needs of a globally competitive economy on many levels.”

Among areas of progress, the report identifies America's educational attainment (in terms of average years of formal education) as one of the highest in the world. It notes that the percentage of Americans with a high school diploma has doubled and that the percentage with a college degree has tripled since 1960. However, although Americans are among the world leaders in educational attainment, other countries have surpassed the United States in high school and college graduation rates. Currently, the United States ranks 17<sup>th</sup> in high school graduation rates and 14<sup>th</sup> in college graduation rates, according to the report. It credits the country's current lead in educational attainment to the legacy of stronger access to education during the “baby boom” years.

*Competitiveness Index* also points out that “significant numbers” of Americans—particularly those from racial and ethnic minorities—are not being adequately served by our high schools. It adds that many Americans leave high school unprepared for college and “unsuitable” for many kinds of employment. The report is particularly concerned with the large skills gap between some racial and ethnic groups and their white classmates. It argues that a failure to address these gaps could mean declining levels of educational attainment across the entire workforce as minorities come to make up a larger percentage of the population and workforce and as baby boomers leave the workforce.

“In 1980, the U.S. workforce was 82 percent white; by 2020, it will be just 63 percent white,” the report reads. “Over these forty years, the share of minorities will double to 37 percent, while the share of Hispanics will triple to 17 percent. If the performance gap between Hispanics, African Americans, and whites persists, the number of Americans ages 26 to 64 who do not have a high school degree could soar.”

The report laments the poor performance by U.S. students on international tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). However, it notes that some American students, schools, and school systems – those that are among the best performing in the United States – are equal to their international peers, and sees this as a hopeful indicator. For example, eighth

*Where America Stands* (Continued from p. 5)

graders in high-achieving states have scores in mathematics that are equal to those in the highest-achieving foreign countries. In addition, American students who passed the AP calculus and physics exams score well above the international average. As a whole, however, twelfth-graders perform poorly, as demonstrated in their last-place performance in math and next-to-last performance in physics.

Because of the increasingly competitive global environment, what is expected of employees and the skills they need for the workplace have changed. Whereas 80 percent of the jobs in 1950 were classified as “unskilled,” today an estimated 85 percent of jobs are considered “skilled,” meaning that some education or training beyond high school is required. In addition, whereas more than half of all factory workers were high school dropouts in 1973, now the percentage without a high school diploma is less than 20 percent, and more than one third have some college education.

The report concludes its spotlight on the American education system with a reference to the 1983 report, *A Nation At Risk*, which alerted Americans to the fact that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.” This new report warns that the problems laid out in *A Nation At Risk* are “even more true today than 20 years ago. ...History is not kind to idlers... We live among determined, well-educated and strongly motivated competitors... America’s position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer.”

More information on the report is available at <http://www.compete.org/store/products.asp?cat=8>.



**RULING ANNOUNCED IN LANDMARK SCHOOL FUNDING CASE: Appeals Court Rules that New York Must Provide a Minimum of \$1.9 Billion to New York City Schools**

On November 20, the New York State Court of Appeals ruled that the state must provide a minimum of \$1.93 billion in additional aid every year to New York City’s public schools, an amount that is significantly less than the \$4.7 billion that a lower court said was the minimum needed to give every child in the city a sound basic education. The case, which was initially brought by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) on behalf of New York City schoolchildren in 1993, has been one of the most closely watched of the school financing cases in a number of states that seek to direct more money to needy school districts.

The ultimate decision on how much additional money New York City schools will receive lies with the New York Legislature and incoming **Governor-elect Eliot Spitzer (D)**, who, in a somewhat ironic twist, represented the state in the lawsuit for the past eight years in his role as attorney general. In his new role as governor, Spitzer will take over for outgoing **Governor George Pataki (R)**, who was unable to come to an agreement with the state legislature on a statewide solution to comply with past court orders. Currently, New York pays about \$7.1

billion, or 45 percent, of the New York City’s total education budget of \$15.4 billion. The court-ordered increase would come on top of this total.

“Governor-elect Spitzer has said that when it comes to public education, he is seeking excellence, not mere competence and sufficiency,” said **CFE Executive Director Geri D. Palast**. “Nothing less than the future of New York State rests on getting this right. I am confident that through negotiations with the new Governor and the legislature, our elected leaders will come through with the right amount of funding, combined with strong accountability measures, and finally deliver for our kids.”

Spitzer has previously said that the figure should be between \$4 and \$6 billion for New York City and up to \$8.5 billion statewide. In a statement after the ruling was issued, he declined to mention a specific number but pledged to provide more money than the constitutional minimum that was established in the court’s decision.

More information on the decision is available at <http://cfequity.org/>.

### **UPCOMING ALLIANCE EVENT: Reaching Every English Language Learner: From Hawaii to Texas to Connecticut**

With low literacy rates, poor performance on national and international assessments, low graduation rates, and high postsecondary remediation rates, it is clear that far too many students—particularly low-income, minority, and English language learning—are not being adequately prepared by America’s secondary schools for college, the workplace, or for citizenship. Yet in middle and high schools across the country, innovative leaders are using a number of strategies to beat the odds, keeping students enrolled and engaged, and graduating them prepared for success.

Join the Alliance for Excellent Education for an informative look at how one district—Kaua’i Area Complex in Hawaii—has leveraged quality instruction to improve the academic achievement of low-income students and English language learners. Interestingly, at Kappa High School, low-income students outperformed high-income students after receiving targeted, intensive intervention. Superintendent Daniel Hamada will share the secrets of Kaua’i’s success. In addition, Dr. Margarita Calderón will share information on her highly successful program, Expediting Comprehension for English Language Learners, used in secondary schools across the country. Calderón has developed a research-based approach to expediting reading comprehension that results in higher test scores, not just for ELLs, but for all students.

This discussion will focus on the challenges concerning English language learners faced by secondary school students, parents, and educators; policies and practices to overcome those challenges; and implications for federal policy to improve America’s secondary schools.

To RSVP for the event, please email [all4ed@all4ed.org](mailto:all4ed@all4ed.org) with the subject line “RSVP: December 6th Breakfast” or call Kathleen Crymble at (202) 828-0828.

***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.



ALLIANCE FOR  
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

1201 Connecticut Ave., NW  
Suite 901  
Washington, DC 20036

Phone 202 828-0828  
Fax 202 828-0821  
Alliance@all4ed.org  
www.all4ed.org

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Public Education Policy And Progress

Volume 6 No. 22: November 27, 2006

**Bob Wise**  
President

**Jason Amos**  
Editor

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Woodbridge, VA

## Volume 6 No. 22: November 27, 2006

In this issue:

- Congress Returns Briefly, Postpones Decision on Education Spending
- *Are They Really Ready to Work?:* Survey of Employers Reveals Dissatisfaction with Skills of Recent High School Graduates
- *Where America Stands:* Report Finds that the U.S. Educational System Fails to Meet the Needs of a Globally Competitive Economy
- Ruling Announced in Landmark School Funding Case: Appeals Court Rules that New York Must Provide a Minimum of \$1.9 Billion to New York City Schools



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