



StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress

Correction: The February 7 issue of *Straight A's* incorrectly reported that Academic Competitiveness and National SMART grants would receive \$60 million in the president's fiscal year 2007 budget request. The correct total is \$850 million, which is an increase of \$60 million over last year. The editor apologizes for any confusion this error may have caused.



YEAR OF MATH AND SCIENCE?: Flurry of Congressional Hearings on Economic Competitiveness Focus on High Schools and Math and Science Instruction

2006 is well on its way to becoming the year of math and science. Last month, in his State of the Union address, President Bush highlighted the need to “encourage children to take more math and science, and to make sure those courses are rigorous enough to compete with other nations.” One week later, the president proposed improving the quality of math, science, and technological education in K–12 schools as part of his American Competitiveness Initiative. In a pair of hearings on Capitol Hill earlier this month, it was Congress's turn to examine how to better prepare American students for a life of innovation.

In the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee hearing on February 9, **Chairman Mike Enzi (R-WY)** said that the nation must boost high school graduation rates and promote lifetime learning among established workers if it is to meet global competition for high-paying 21st-century jobs.

“At a time when most jobs will require some postsecondary education, we must focus on how to graduate more students on time, with less need for remediation, and give them a greater likelihood of success in college or the workplace,” he said. “It's equally important that established workers—those already on the career ladder—get the additional training and retraining they will need to advance in the marketplace of tomorrow and throughout their lifetimes.”

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, who served as the sole witness at the HELP Committee hearing, promoted the president's American Competitiveness Initiative. “The president's American Competitiveness Initiative will double the federal investment in science over the next decade to make sure we continue to lead the world in Nobel Prize winners,” she said. “And it will encourage the private sector to make bold investments in research and innovation to produce the next big breakthrough. But to do all this, we must first give our students the skills to compete and lead in the global economy.”

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Spellings cited a need for workers with “pocket protector skills” who can use their strong backgrounds in math and science to solve problems, whether they are fixing an automobile or performing a challenging science experiment. Currently, she noted, “almost half of our 17-year-olds don’t have the math skills to work as a production associate at a modern auto plant.”

To help meet these challenges, Spellings called for more research about successful math interventions and instruction. “We need to do for math what we’ve done for reading by building a scientific-research base of classroom practices that are proven to work,” she said. She also said she wanted to build on the foundations of the No Child Left Behind Act to help prepare students for more rigorous math and science coursework in high school.

Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA), the ranking member on the HELP Committee, said that “in totality,” the administration’s efforts in math and science were on the right track, but he sharply criticized the president’s plan to create a new program while eliminating others, particularly those benefiting students from low-income families. The administration’s spending plan looks like a “shell game,” he said.

Earlier that morning, on the other side of the Capitol, the House Committee on Government Reform heard from **U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez** and an assortment of representatives from business and industry. In his testimony, Secretary Gutierrez spoke about competitiveness in terms of open markets, immigration policy, and other elements that affect the nation’s ability to stay competitive. He also stressed that the U.S. must continue its investment in human capital to have the capacity to continually innovate and stay ahead of the competition.

Not surprisingly, most of the witnesses addressed their comments to the need for more science, technology, engineering, and mathematics graduates. However, they also used the opportunity to press for more intervention at the K–12 level.

“With a public education system that consistently falls behind those of other nations in the world, we are failing our children right here at home in the most fundamental way,” said **Hector de Jesus Ruiz, chairman and CEO of Advanced Micro Devices**. “We have a responsibility to them and to future generations to ensure that America remains the land of greatest opportunity. That begins with making a conscious and considerable investment in improving our K–12 education system. And while math and science education are critically important, especially in this new technology-driven economy, I firmly believe we must focus on improving our entire education system across all subject areas.”

A summary of Chairman Enzi’s opening statement is available at http://help.senate.gov/Maj_press/2006_02_09.pdf.

Secretary Spellings’s testimony is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2006/02/02092006.html>.

Testimony from the House Government Reform Committee hearing is available at <http://reform.house.gov/GovReform/Hearings/EventSingle.aspx?EventID=39022>.

Building and Filling the Pipeline: High Schools Key to the Competitiveness Agenda

On February 16, the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee held the “Roundtable on Competitiveness: Building and Filling the Pipeline,” the second in a series of hearings based on the president’s American Competitiveness Initiative. The witnesses at the event included representatives from high schools, colleges, and the business world, who talked about high school as a critical piece in the competitiveness agenda.

In his opening statement, Senate HELP Committee Chairman Mike Enzi spoke about the importance of “building and filling the pipeline” to ensure that America produces enough workers to fill highly skilled jobs. “Unless more students complete high school on time and prepared for postsecondary education or the workforce, we will not have enough people in the pipeline to meet the projected 4.5 million skilled worker shortage by 2010,” he said. “Without an educated workforce we are certain to lose our preeminence in the world to developing nations that are quickly growing, educating their citizens, and innovating at a much faster rate than we are.”

Audio and video from the roundtable, as well as the complete list of witnesses, is available at http://help.senate.gov/Hearings/2006_02_16/2006_02_16.html.



MCKEON APPOINTED CHAIR OF HOUSE EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE COMMITTEE

On February 15, **Representative Howard P. “Buck” McKeon (R-CA)** was named the new chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Education and the Workforce after **Representative John Boehner (R-OH)** was elected House majority leader. Under House rules, Boehner had to relinquish his post as committee chair, a position he had held since January 2001.

“The new realities that I discussed in my chairmanship bid are an economy that is worldwide, high tech, and highly competitive,” said McKeon. “The edge that America brings to the table is innovation and adaptability. If we lose that then we will lose not only our standard of living, but our position of global leadership.”

McKeon, who has held a seat on the committee since 1993 and previously served as chairman of the Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness, has specified that he wants to improve the quality of American education, train the workforce to adapt to a high-tech global economy, and make regulations that are more streamlined and less costly.

During his time as chairman, Boehner played a critical role in negotiating the No Child Left Behind Act, working closely with President Bush on the landmark education law. One Republican who has worked with both Bush and Boehner told *Roll Call*, a publication covering Congress, that Bush and Boehner’s relationship is “a little closer than most Members [have]. I think they forged a pretty strong bond during Boehner’s stewardship of No Child Left Behind. They came to respect each other and trust each other.”

With Boehner now installed as the House majority leader, a post second only to **House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-IL)**, educators hope that he will use his influence and his relationship with President Bush to give education issues a higher profile. As **Larry J. Sabato, the director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia**, noted in *Education Week*, “Education is “a focus of Boehner’s, and obviously the majority leader has a lot of flexibility” and influence on agenda-setting.



MARYLAND LEGISLATION WOULD CODIFY GOVERNORS' COMPACT ON HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES: Alliance President Testifies in Support of Legislation

On February 14, **Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise** testified before the Maryland House of Delegates' Ways and Means Committee in support of House Bill 71. The bill would establish accurate and honest comparisons of graduation rates from high school to high school and district to district. It supports the intent of the National Governors Association Compact on Graduation Rates, now signed by all state governors, which called for a common, broadly accepted reporting formula for all states and school districts across the nation to provide accurate graduation rate and dropout data.

“Of particular concern to the bill’s sponsors and the Alliance for Excellent Education is the fact that much of the current graduation data conceals the dangerously high percentage of students—disproportionately poor and minority—who disappear from the education pipeline before high school graduation,” Wise said. “Research from the Urban Institute suggests that approximately 50 percent of students from historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic backgrounds do not finish high school. They have a 50-50 chance of obtaining a degree, a startling statistic when you consider that in today's economy, the vast majority of jobs that offer self-sufficiency and the ability to support a family require approximately 2 years of education after high school.”

HB71 is sponsored by **Delegates Ana Sol Gutierrez (D)** and **Salima Siler Marriott (D)** and was developed in collaboration with the Alliance for Excellent Education and other education organizations. Delegate Gutierrez’s introduction of this bill marks the first step in a campaign by members of the National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators and the National Black Caucus of State Legislators to support the introduction of similar legislation in a number of other states.

Maryland’s department of education has already received a \$5.7 million federal grant to implement the more stringent student tracking system.

Governor Wise’s complete testimony is available at http://www.all4ed.org/press/pr_021406.html#Testimony.



HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM BEST PREDICTOR OF SUCCESS IN COLLEGE: Longitudinal Study Finds Reading Skills a Must for Accessing Challenging High School Material

A challenging high school curriculum is the best pre-college predictor of whether a student will obtain a bachelor’s degree, according to a new report from the U.S. Department of Education. It adds that students must have the reading skills necessary to access material in challenging courses or “all will be beyond them.” The report, *The Toolbox Revised: Paths to Degree Completion From High School Through College*, uses data from an 8-and-a-half-year longitudinal study that follows the high school class of 1992 through December 2000 and asks what aspects of their formal schooling contributed to completing a bachelor’s degree by their mid-20s.

“This new data empirically confirms what educators already know: Challenging high school coursework prepares students for the much tougher challenges that lie ahead,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. “It also helps colleges and universities by reducing the need for costly remedial education.”

Unfortunately, not all high school students have the opportunity to take challenging classes. For example, the report found that the highest level of mathematics reached in high school continues to be a key indicator of success in college, and that students who complete Algebra II are far more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree. It noted, however, that Latino students are far less likely to attend high schools offering trigonometry and other high levels of math than white or Asian students. In addition, students from the lowest 20 percent of socioeconomic status attend high schools that are much less likely to offer any math above Algebra II.

“If we are going to close gaps in preparation—and ultimate degree attainment—the provision of curriculum issue has to be addressed,” the report reads. “In recent years, colleges and community colleges have begun to provide these courses to high school students, and distance learning provides additional options if students have access to the technology.”

The report also cautioned that students who enter high school reading far below grade level are a special concern: ***“If students cannot read close to grade level, the biology textbook, the math problems, the history documents, the novel—all will be beyond them.”***

In order to better prepare high school students for college coursework, the report calls for a greater dissemination of the expectations and assignments that students will likely see. It notes that examples such as those from the American Diploma Project’s 2004 report, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*, should be shared with parents, high school teachers, and high school students.

The report also found that college students with fewer than 20 credits by the end of their freshman year are much less likely to obtain a bachelor’s degree. To help students accumulate credits, it suggests students be given greater access to dual enrollment programs that allow them to earn college credits while they are still in high school. It also stressed that high school students need to enter postsecondary education immediately following high school graduation. “The longer students wait, the less likely they will finish with a degree.”

While the number of minority students in postsecondary institutions is rising, Latinos and African Americans continue to receive bachelor’s degrees at a rate well below their white and Asian peers. According to the report, closing this achievement gap will require work both after the college matriculation line, and in communication and outreach between postsecondary institutions and high schools.

The report concludes with some recommendations for students, who it calls “partners in their own education fate,” who “shouldn’t wait around for someone else to do something for them, and who are rarely addressed in studies of attainment.” It also urges a “considerable change” in the language used to describe what happens to students—from a “negative rhetoric that assumes passivity” to one that “respects students as active players, seeking and discovering paths to their education goals.”

Secretary Spellings's statement and a link to the report are available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2006/02/02142006.html>.

States Post Gains on Advanced Placement Tests

All 50 states and the District of Columbia saw an increase in the percentage of high school students who earned a grade of 3 or higher (on a 5-point scale) on an Advanced Placement test since 2000, according to a new report from the College Board. The second annual report, *Advanced Placement Report to the Nation*, found that 14.1 percent of all students in the class of 2005 demonstrated mastery of an AP exam by earning an exam grade of 3 or higher—the grade predictive of college success—on an AP exam while in high school, up from 13.2 percent in 2004 and 10.2 percent in 2000. The report said that higher scores are evidence that the quality of learning in AP classrooms has remained steady even as more students are taking AP courses.

“Participation in AP has remarkable benefits for students; most notably, AP math and science courses are enabling American students to develop a level of math and science expertise that exceeds that of students from all other nations; the AP world language courses are developing our students’ capacity to engage with Asian and European cultures, while AP English and social science courses develop the skills necessary for students to write effectively, think critically, and engage with great minds from the world’s cultures,” said **College Board President Gaston Caperton**.

The report did find that more work needs to be done, as 35 states and the District of Columbia achieved lower results than the nationwide average of 14.1 percent. In addition, African-American and Native American students remain significantly underrepresented in AP classrooms. Nationwide, the report found that African-American students make up 13.4 percent of the student population, but only 6.4 percent of AP exam takers, and Native Americans make up 1.1 percent of the student population, but only 0.5 percent of the AP examinee population.

The complete report is available at <http://www.collegeboard.com/press/article/0,,50291,00.html>.



STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESSES: Rhode Island and Tennessee Governors Stress Education Reform as Central to Thriving Economies

Saying that “science and technology are keys to higher paying jobs,” **Rhode Island Governor Donald Carcieri (R)**, during his state of the state address on January 25, outlined a new \$15 million, four-part plan to make Rhode Island schools the national leaders in science, math, and technology.

The governor, who is a former high school math teacher, developed his plan based on the recommendations of a Science and Technology Advisory Council that he created about 9 months ago. The plan includes greater opportunities for students to take more rigorous programs of study and improved teacher training in math and science, especially at the elementary level.

Governor Carcieri lauded the state’s suburban and rural schools, but expressed hope that the state could improve the outcomes for students in urban schools. “Our suburban and rural schools are ... performing above the national average,” he said. “But we all know we need to lift the performance of our urban schools.” To this end, the governor proposed creating a single Metropolitan School District that would include Providence, Central Falls, and Pawtucket. He said that combining these districts could “produce significant efficiencies in administration, transportation, standardized curriculum, and infrastructure.”

In his state of the state address on February 7, saying that Tennessee's students "deserve nothing less," **Governor Phil Bredesen (D)** set a goal for the state of a 90 percent high school graduation rate and a 55 percent college graduation rate by 2012. "One important result we need to watch is improving graduation rates," he said. "We lag the national averages here, and if we don't fix that, the economy of America in the years ahead is going to pass us by. Nearly a quarter of our students don't make it through high school; we then don't have enough students who do graduate going on to college, and for every 100 who do start college, only about 45 get a degree within 6 years."

In his speech, Bredesen highlighted Tennessee's program to bring midcareer professionals from other fields into high school classrooms to teach math and science, but stressed that the state needed to continue to invest in its teachers.

"We need to work with our schools of education to send us teachers with the training they need in a new century," he said. "We need to support our teachers with competitive pay, with the materials they need to teach, with safe classrooms ... If we train and recruit and keep and support great teachers, our kids will do fine; if we fail to do this, we can test kids every day and stack computers one on top of another, and we'll still come up short."

Grant Competition for Improving Literacy Through School Libraries Program Now Open

The U.S. Department of Education is now accepting grant applications for the Improving Literacy Through School Libraries (LSL) program. The program focuses on providing funding to public school libraries in districts with 20 percent or more family poverty. Funds are used to improve reading achievement through updating the library collection, expanding Internet connections, purchasing new technology, providing professional development for library media specialists, and extending school library hours.

Please note that individual schools cannot apply for this program. The grant competition is for public local school districts or charter schools or state-administered schools that are considered local school districts by their State Educational Agency. It is also important to be aware that, for the first time, LSL applicants must use the online U.S. Federal Government's Grants applications system to apply. This is a different electronic application system from what was used in the past. The department is urging all applicants to register early, as the registration process can take from 7 to 10 days. It is also necessary to send in your application at least 3 days before the closing date of the competition, since it can take that long to process the application.

Applications are due by April 11. Approximately \$19 million in funding will be available for an estimated 100 grants. More information on the grant program and the full application package are available at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/lsl>.

Any questions should be directed to Dr. Irene Harwarth, the team leader for the Improving Literacy Through School Libraries program, at irene.harwarth@ed.gov.

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.



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