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Public Education Policy And Progress



CONGRESS COMES TO AGREEMENT ON BUDGET RESOLUTION: Budget Blueprint Outlines Large Funding Increase for Education Programs

Federal spending on education programs would increase significantly next year under the plan laid out in the fiscal year (FY) 2008 congressional budget resolution that Congress passed on May 17. The resolution provides \$9.5 billion more in FY 2008 for education, training, and social services than the amount that President Bush proposed in his budget earlier this year. (More information on President Bush's budget request is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/StraightAs/Volume7No3.html#Budget.>)

“This budget provides a fiscally responsible plan for our country,” said **Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D-ND)**. “It balances the budget by 2012. It provides for an extension of middle-class tax cuts. And it funds the nation's priorities, including a strong national defense, improving veterans' health care, expanding children's health care, and increasing our investment in education. We've been placed in a deep hole. This plan will begin to dig us out.”

According to Conrad, the federal budget would be balanced by 2012, and would even achieve a surplus that year of \$41 billion, under the plan that Congress adopted. The anticipated surplus results from a budget resolution assumption that most of President Bush's signature tax cuts from 2001 and 2003 will expire on schedule in 2010. However, the resolution does allow popular tax cuts to be extended, including the child tax credit and others that predominantly benefit the middle class.

The congressional budget resolution sets a maximum amount that Congress can allocate overall to agencies for the next fiscal year, which begins on October 1; it also provides targets for revenue and projects the surplus or deficit for the next five fiscal years. The resolution serves as a guide for the remainder of the congressional appropriations process, and although it recommends amounts to be spent on various departments, its only binding number is the overall spending cap—\$954.1 billion, in this case.

The next step in the process is for the chairmen of the House and Senate appropriations committees to divide the \$954.1 billion total among the twelve appropriations subcommittees. They divide this money as they see fit and do not need to adhere to the specific recommendations laid out in the budget resolution for individual areas of spending. Thus, the additional \$9.5 billion for education, training, and social programs recommended as part of the resolution may change, but with a higher overall spending cap, it remains likely that education will receive increases over past years.

\$21 Billion Difference in Overall Spending Cap Likely to be Point of Contention Between Congress and President Bush

The \$954.1 billion spending ceiling for FY 2008 that the congressional budget resolution provides is about \$21 billion more than was included in the president's proposed budget. This large difference will likely become an issue as individual appropriations bills are passed by Congress and sent to the White House for the president's signature. Already, **Rob Portman, director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)**, has said that he would recommend a veto for any spending bills that exceed the president's budget request.

"The new Democratic majorities are standing by their misguided plans for tax hikes and big spending increases," Portman said in a statement. "Tax and spend is no way to balance the budget. It jeopardizes continued economic growth and job creation. And it means that taxpayers will be sending more of their hard-earned money to Washington."

Conservative Republicans in the House of Representatives are already working to gain support for the president's position. As of last week, 115 Republicans have signed a letter pledging to support the president should he decide to veto any appropriations bill. To override a presidential veto, a two-thirds majority in both the House of Representatives and the Senate is required. In order to prevent a veto override, then, House Republicans would need at least 146 votes in support of the veto. To date, Republican moderates and most Republicans on the House Appropriations Committee have yet to sign the letter, although some have said that they would consider voting for an override on a case-by-case basis.

Representative Mike Castle (R-DE), for instance, who last year led an effort by House Republican moderates to add funding to the Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education appropriations bill, said that he would not sign the letter at this point. "I'm going to look at each of these bills individually," he said. "I would worry about signing something like that just because of the enormity of the numbers."

A May 21 article in *Roll Call*, a newspaper covering Capitol Hill, reported that some Republicans may find it difficult to vote against increased spending for education, health care, and other popular domestic programs—especially since those programs have seen few spending increases over the last few years.

"I think some of the cuts [Bush] proposed in [the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill] are overly optimistic," said **Representative Jim Walsh (R-NY)**, who serves on the House Appropriations Committee.

In addition, the article notes that **Representative Mike Simpson (R-ID)**, another member of the House Appropriations Committee, said that Republicans should not have complied with the president's request in previous years. Simpson also said that he expected many Republicans to vote to override any presidential vetoes, particularly on bills that provide increased funding for education and health care. "If the president vetoes those things, then he vetoes them," he said. "We need to do what we think is right."

MOVING FORWARD ON NCLB REAUTHORIZATION: House Education Committee Hears Concerns and Ideas from Non-Committee Members on NCLB Reauthorization

On May 16, members of the House Education and Labor Committee held a bipartisan meeting to hear recommendations and concerns from other members of Congress on ways to improve the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Among those making presentations were the leaders of the House caucuses representing Asian Americans, Hispanics, African Americans, conservatives, and moderate Republicans.

“Our committee is committed to working in an open and collaborative way to improve the No Child Left Behind law,” said **Representative George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee**. “Just like the people they represent, members of Congress have diverse views about the law, including concerns about how it could work better. But it’s clear that we all share the goal of making sure that every child is able to succeed in school, and we will work together to achieve that goal.”

Miller acknowledged that some of the ideas shared at the meeting would require a dramatic overhaul of the law but said that he was willing to incorporate some of the recommendations in the reauthorization. “There will be very substantial changes,” he told *Education Week*. “There are portions of this bill that simply aren’t working. That’s what reauthorization is about. It’s not just about standing pat.”

Education Week also reported that a change to the method for calculating Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for schools and districts was discussed. One idea would allow schools and districts to consider student academic growth and to include other factors besides test scores when calculating AYP. These “growth models,” as they are called, give schools credit for student improvement over time by tracking individual student achievement from year to year. Other topics covered at the hearing included how to assess students with disabilities on the basis of their progress toward meeting goals in their individual education programs, and how to determine whether teachers are highly qualified other than by the types of credentials that they have.

“The amount of interest we saw today—from both sides of the aisle—reaffirms this law’s impact and the depth of support for closing the achievement gap,” said **Representative Howard P. “Buck” McKeon (R-CA), the Education and Labor Committee’s senior Republican member**. “I appreciated hearing my colleagues’ varying perspectives on what Congress should address during this year’s reauthorization. Their comments and recommendations will be taken into serious consideration as we move forward.”

The House Education and Labor Committee could begin considering a draft reauthorization bill as early as June. In the Senate, **Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chairman Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)** also hopes to have a reauthorization bill ready for consideration by summer.

Chairman Miller’s press release about the meeting is available at http://www.house.gov/apps/list/speech/edlabor_dem/RelMay16NCLB.html.

“Miller Signals Support for Change on NCLB” is available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/05/23/38nclb.h26.html>. (Registration required)



RIGOR AT RISK: ACT Finds that Core High School Curriculum Lacks Rigor, Leads to Unprepared High School Graduates

At a time when it is becoming more important for U.S. workers to compete internationally, the nation’s high school graduates too often enter college or the workforce without sufficient academic preparation. So says *Rigor at Risk*, a new report from ACT, Inc. According to the report, American high school core courses lack the rigor necessary to adequately prepare students for life after high school—whether in postsecondary education or in the workplace. In fact, the report shows that three out of four ACT-tested Class of 2006 high school graduates who

Rigor at Risk

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took a core curriculum were not prepared to take or succeed in credit-bearing entry-level college courses.¹ ACT also finds that even students who take additional higher-level courses are not always ready for college and suggests that many students lose academic momentum during their last two years of high school.

“We’ve been urging college-bound students to take the core curriculum in high school for many years,” said **Cynthia B. Schmeiser, president and chief operating officer of ACT’s education division**. “But now it is clear that just taking the right number of courses is no longer enough to ensure that students will be ready for college when they graduate. Students must take a number of additional higher-level courses in high school to have a reasonable chance of succeeding in college courses, and even that does not guarantee success.”

While students who take the recommended core curriculum are likely to be more prepared for college courses than students who do not take these courses, the report notes that merely taking the right number of courses is not enough to ensure that students are college-ready. According to the report, only about one fourth of students who took the core curriculum are ready for college-level work in English, mathematics, social science, and natural science. ACT also finds that about 20 percent of students are not college-ready in any subject and that nearly 75 percent of Class of 2006 high school graduates who took the ACT lack preparation in at least one subject area.²

On the other hand, high school graduates who took core courses plus additional higher-level courses met the ACT College Benchmarks in greater percentages than graduates who took only the core curriculum.³ As shown in the table below, 67 percent of students who took only the core curriculum met the ACT College Benchmark in English. Meanwhile, 77 percent of students who took more than the core curriculum in English met the benchmark—a 10 percent difference.

Subject	“Core” Students	“Core+” Students	Difference
English	67%	77%	10%
Science	26%	38%	12%
Math	16%	75%	59%

The chart also demonstrates, however, that merely taking additional courses will not guarantee college readiness. For example, 23 percent of students who took the core curriculum plus additional courses in English failed to meet the ACT benchmark. The same was true for 62 percent of students in science and 25 percent in math. For this reason, ACT suggests a close

¹ The report defines a core curriculum as four years of English and three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies.

² It is important to remember that these statistics do not reflect those students who drop out of high school or those students who do not take the ACT. Were these groups of students given the ACT, it is reasonable to expect the percentage of students who lack college skills to be higher.

³ The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks represent the “level of achievement required for students to have a high probability of success (a 75 percent chance of earning a course grade of ‘C’ or better, and a 50 percent chance of earning a ‘B’ or better) in such credit-bearing college courses as English composition, algebra, and biology.”

examination of the quality and intensity of the high school curriculum. “It is neither realistic nor justifiable to expect all high school students to take more and more courses to learn what they need to learn for college,” the report reads. “Improving the rigor of high school core courses benefits not just those students who are traditionally considered bound for college, but the majority of high school students who typically have not benefited from advanced coursework or other similar efforts to increase college readiness.”

After examining the core courses required to graduate from high school, ACT finds that more than half of the states do not require students to take specific core courses in math or science. It also finds that only twenty-six states require any mathematics courses at all. Of those twenty-six states, only twelve require Algebra II and only four require a math course beyond Algebra II. In science, thirty states require at least one course for graduation, but only seventeen require biology and only two require physics. That so few students are taking advanced classes in math and science is especially troubling because students who take these courses are much more likely to be prepared for college.

In its report, ACT recommends that states spell out the number and the kinds of courses that students need to take to graduate from high school and that these courses be aligned to the requirements of postsecondary education. Specifically, it recommends that students take four years of English, at least three years of mathematics (including rigorous courses in Algebra I, geometry, and Algebra II), three years of science (including rigorous courses in biology, chemistry, and physics), and three years of social studies.

However, simply taking Algebra II or physics will not necessarily help a student if the class lacks rigor. In fact, the report finds that even students who succeed in high school are not necessarily prepared for college. For example, 43 percent of ACT-tested Class of 2005 high school graduates who earned a grade of ‘A’ or ‘B’ in Algebra II did not meet the ACT College Readiness Benchmark in math. In addition, 53 percent of graduates who earned a grade of ‘A’ or ‘B’ in physics did not meet the ACT College Readiness Benchmark in science.

Another barrier to better college preparation that the report identifies is the large percentages of students who enter high school without the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. As evidence, the report cites a recent ACT survey in which teachers of entering high school students report spending from one fifth to one third of their time in the classroom reteaching skills that should have been learned prior to high school. To better serve their students, the report says, middle schools should examine their curricula to ensure that they reflect what students need to be successful in high school.

Another problem the report identifies is the fact that teachers who are not professionally qualified to teach or who are not yet experienced enough to teach well are often assigned to lower-level courses and to those students who are furthest behind and need the most help. ACT recommends that schools evaluate whether they are assigning the right teachers to the right core courses and ensure that inexperienced teachers are not disproportionately assigned to teach students who need the most help and who could benefit from more experienced teachers.

The complete report is available at <http://www.act.org/path/policy/reports/rigor.html>.

Lack of College-Educated Workers Will Hamper California's Economy in the Near Future

In 2005, the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) released *California 2025: Taking on the Future*, a report that examined the future of California's workforce and the jobs that would await them. The report notes that California would suffer from a dearth of college graduates by 2020. Specifically, although 75 percent of all jobs in 2020 would require either some college or a college degree, only 61 percent of the population would have these qualifications. On the other end of the spectrum, PPI found that 22 percent of California's workers will have less than a high school diploma, but only 11 percent of California's jobs will accept such a low level of education.

The report also notes that Latinos are projected to become the largest racial group in the state within a decade and will eventually reach majority status. Yet Latinos are poorly served by California's education system and generally have lower levels of education.

"In the coming decades, if California's youth do not get a college education, they face the prospect of low or no employment, lack of opportunities for high-paying jobs, and greater likelihood of depending on public health and social services," the report reads. "They will also generate lower tax revenues for supporting the state's infrastructure and other services needs."

In *Can California Import Enough College Graduates to Meet Workforce Needs?*, a newly published follow-up to the *California 2025* report, PPIC finds that California should not expect to be able to import the college graduates that it needs from other states and countries to fill highly skilled jobs. As a result, the state should "rein in expectations" about what its economy will look like in twenty years.

"Inevitably, if education levels in the state don't catch up, the economy will adjust in one way or another," says **PPIC Director of Research Deborah Reed**, who coauthored the study with **PPIC research fellow and demographer Hans Johnson**. "The workforce of 2025 will be skilled, but will not be as skilled—and the economy not as productive or high-income—as current projections imply."

One reason for California's low levels of education attainment is that the state has trouble retaining its own college graduates, in part because of California's high cost of housing. According to the report, 658,000 college-educated California residents left the state between 2000 and 2005, while approximately 612,000 college-educated migrants came to California from other states—a net loss of 46,000 college graduates.

PPIC notes that immigrants have provided California with skilled labor in the past, but it estimates that the already robust arrival rate of skilled immigrants would have to more than double to meet the projected demand. According to the report, the population of immigrants with college degrees has grown almost thirtyfold since 1960, and foreign-born residents now make up 31 percent of all California's college graduates ages twenty-five to sixty-four. It adds that between 2000 and 2005, for the first time, immigrants to California with a college degree exceeded the number of immigrants who were not high school graduates.

"For either foreign or domestic migrants to fill California's skills gap would require migration of unprecedented magnitude," says Johnson. "That seems implausible, if not impossible."

The report recommends that, rather than continuing to rely solely on well-educated immigrants, California turn its attention to raising the college entrance and graduation rates among its own residents. "Public policy has a critical role to play because the vast majority of California's college students are attending public institutions," said Johnson. "The state has significant latitude to implement policies that could directly address participation and completion rates—and if there was ever a time to do that, it's now."

Can California Import Enough College Graduates to Meet Workforce Needs? is available at <http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=750>.

California 2025: Taking on the Future is available at <http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=489>.



STUDENTS AT ALL LEVELS SHOW IMPROVEMENT IN HISTORY AND CIVICS: Even With Improvement, Large Percentages of Students Continue to Perform Below Grade Level

America's fourth graders have made significant gains in U.S. history and civics, according to results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests in history and civics. According to the two reports, *The Nation's Report Card: U.S. History 2006* and *Nation's Report Card: Civics 2006*, overall achievement has improved significantly at all grade levels (fourth, eighth, and twelfth) in U.S. history, and at the fourth-grade level in civics. Meanwhile, civics achievement for eighth- and twelfth-graders has not changed significantly since 1998.

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings tied the higher scores in history and civics to the greater focus on reading brought about by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). "For the past five years, No Child Left Behind has focused attention and support on helping students become stronger readers," Spellings said. "The release today by The Nation's Report Card on U.S. History and Civics proves NCLB is working and preparing our children to succeed. ... As students' skills in reading fluency and comprehension strengthen, so does their ability to do well in other subject areas. While critics may argue that NCLB leads educators to narrow their curriculum focus, the fact is, when students know how to read and comprehend, they apply these skills to other subjects like history and civics. The result is greater academic gains."

While the improvement among twelfth graders marks the first time since 1998 that high school students have had a significant increase in achievement on a NAEP assessment, large percentages of high school seniors continued to perform poorly on both tests. In history, 87 percent of twelfth graders failed to perform at grade level, with 53 percent performing below the basic level. Results at the eighth-grade level were not much better, with 83 percent performing below grade level. Of that total, 35 percent performed below the basic level.

Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia, used the results to push for greater attention to reading in the later grades. "For those of us working to improve the nation's secondary schools, the results released today are encouraging, but it must be noted that while these scores are headed in the right direction, they still remain alarmingly low," he said. "Low achievement in history and civics goes hand in hand with low achievement in high school literacy. If we want young people to become more knowledgeable about the nation's defining historical events and founding principles, then we must invest in not just history and civics instruction, but also in high-quality reading and writing instruction throughout grades K-12."

The complete results are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.

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 six million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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