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Public Education Policy And Progress



## **SENATE BEGINS DEBATE ON EDUCATION SPENDING BILL: White House Threatens Presidential Veto**

Last week, the Senate began consideration of the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education appropriations bill, the largest domestic spending legislation. The bill provides funding for the U.S. Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), Education, and other agencies. Although the final vote is not expected before October 23, the bill as it is currently written would provide the U.S. Department of Education with \$60.1 billion in discretionary funding in FY 2008. This is \$2 billion less than the version of the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill that passed the House of Representatives on July 19, but \$4.1 billion more than the amount that President Bush included in his FY 2008 budget request. In total, for all departments and agencies that it funds, the bill would authorize \$9.6 billion more in discretionary spending than the amount included in the president's budget request. For that reason, President Bush has threatened to veto the bill.

During floor debate, **Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), the chairman of the Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee**, pointed out that President Bush's budget would have cut programs covered by this bill by \$3.5 billion compared to last year and questioned the president's spending priorities.

"The president says he wants \$12 billion a month for the war in Iraq, but we shouldn't spend [approximately \$10 billion] over his budget for one full year for all of the other things we do in education and in health care and in human services," Harkin said. "Rather than cut the essential programs and services in this bill, we have chosen in a bipartisan fashion to provide a very modest increase. So we respectfully disagree with the president. We believe it is time to make investments in this country. It is time for the president to put our own needs here at home first. For five years we have poured untold billions of U.S. taxpayers' dollars into schools, job programs, hospitals, and human services in Iraq. It is time we looked after those same needs here in America. That is exactly what we propose to do in this bill."

Prior to the Senate debate, the White House issued a Statement of Administration Policy criticizing the bill for an "irresponsible and excessive level of spending" and threatened to veto it. "[The Senate Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill] exceeds the president's request for programs funded in this bill by ... \$9 billion, part of the [more than \$20 billion increase] above the president's request for FY 2008 appropriations," the letter reads. "The administration has asked that Congress demonstrate a path to live within the President's topline and cover the excess spending in this bill through reductions elsewhere, while ensuring the Department of

## **Senate Begins Debate on Education Spending Bill** (Continued from p. 1)

Defense has the resources necessary to accomplish its mission. Because Congress has failed to demonstrate such a path, if [the bill] were presented to the President, he would veto the bill.”

Prior to debate, a coalition of 850 education, labor, and health organizations sent a letter to all one hundred Senate offices in an effort to get a “veto-proof” margin in the Senate in favor of the bill, which would require the support of approximately sixty-seven Senators. If the bill garners that many votes initially, the logic goes, the president might be willing to support the bill in an effort to avoid the embarrassment that a veto override would cause.

“While our organizations represent a wide array of domestic priorities, we are united in our effort to increase discretionary funding substantially for health, education, labor enforcement, job training and social services programs as the appropriations process moves forward,” the letter reads. “This increased investment is essential to sustain and advance the well-being and prosperity of our nation.” (The complete letter is available at <http://www.cef.org/>).

If the president does veto the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill, it will take a two-thirds vote in both the House and Senate to override it. Such support is certainly possible, but it would be an uphill climb. For example, on October 18, the House of Representatives attempted to override the president’s veto on a bill that would have expanded a children’s health care program called SCHIP, but fell thirteen votes short. (More information on the SCHIP debate, including Republicans’ reasons for voting against the override is available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/18/AR2007101800095.html>).

The president’s willingness to spend more money in Iraq but not at home has left more than Democrats puzzled. “I don’t know who’s advising him up there, but the president is really out of touch,” **House Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee ranking member David Hobson (R-OH)** told *CongressDaily*. “It’s too little, too late for him to be a fiscal conservative. He should have vetoed the (2002) farm bill ... now he’s against the SCHIP bill, he wants \$190 billion more for the war, but he’s picking a fight over \$23 billion?”

For funding levels for specific programs, visit <http://www.all4ed.org/files/Fiscal08ProgramChart.pdf>.



### **NCLB TIMETABLE IN QUESTION: Discussions Bog Down Over Proposal to Provide Greater Flexibility in Meeting Accountability Provisions**

In a speech at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, on July 30, **House Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA)** stated his intention to have the U.S. House of Representatives pass a renewal of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) during the month of September. In the following weeks, Chairman Miller and **Ranking Member Howard P. “Buck” McKeon (R-CA)** released a 435-page draft plan for reauthorizing NCLB and held a marathon hearing that lasted over six hours and allowed over forty witnesses the opportunity to comment on the Miller/McKeon draft. Since then, however, talks on the reauthorization of NCLB have bogged down as Republican lawmakers have grown concerned about what they interpret as a watering down of the law’s accountability provisions.

President Bush tried to inject a sense of urgency into those talks during an October 9 speech in the Rose Garden before a group of civil rights community leaders and advocates for minority and disadvantaged students. At the same time, he underscored his belief that the core principles of NCLB should remain unchanged.

“There can be no compromise on the basic principle: Every child must learn to read and do math at, or above, grade level,” the president said. “And there can be no compromise on the need to hold schools accountable to making sure we achieve that goal. I call on members of Congress to come together to pass bipartisan legislation that will help us achieve this goal. By working together, we can raise standards even higher, expand opportunity for all Americans of all backgrounds, and build a future where no child is left behind.”

One of the key disagreements between Republicans and Democrats is whether to allow states greater flexibility in meeting the accountability provisions of the law. Specifically, Chairman Miller would prefer to judge schools on multiple measures, rather than relying solely on a single test as the current law dictates. As included in the draft plan issued last month, states would have the opportunity to consider other measures of progress, such as graduation rates, dropout rates, and improvements in the performance of the lowest- and highest-performing students in the school. Miller would also allow states to include scores from state tests in history and other subjects as additional measures of how schools were performing. However, those scores would only be given a fraction of the weight that math and reading results receive in determining Adequate Yearly Progress.

“There is a very clear perception in this country that this law is not fair or flexible when it comes to judging students, teachers, or schools,” Miller told the Business Coalition for Student Achievement last month. “You cannot assess the success or failure of a school on one test, on one day.”

McKeon, however, has a different take on the multiple measures proposal. “Either you can read or you can’t,” he told *Roll Call*, a newspaper covering Capitol Hill. “Either you can do simple math or you can’t. The main purpose of No Child Left Behind was to make sure kids can read and do basic math. It’s starting to work.”

According to the *Roll Call* article, Miller remains hopeful that a bipartisan compromise can be reached but acknowledged that time is running out. He added that he would like to have the bill on the House floor before the end of the year.

In a statement issued after President Bush’s speech, **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee Chairman Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)** indicated that he plans to introduce reauthorization language by the end of October, but he did not indicate when it would come before the HELP Committee for its consideration.

President Bush’s speech is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/10/20071009-5.html>.



## **SCHOOLS NOT PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE GLOBAL ECONOMY?: Americans Think Students Need Broader Range of Skills than Schools are Teaching**

Schools are not adequately preparing students for the globally competitive workforce environment of the twenty-first century, according to a new poll from the Partnership for Twenty-first Century Skills that was conducted by Public Opinion Strategies and Peter D. Hart Research Associates.

The poll also finds that half of those surveyed say that the country is moving in the wrong direction in ensuring that students have the skills necessary to compete in a global economy. In addition, 42 percent think that other developed countries are doing a better job than the United States in preparing their children for the jobs of the twenty-first century, compared to only 13 percent who think that the United States is doing a better job than other countries.

“The loud and clear message from this poll is that Americans recognize the need for our schools to help our students regain their competitive advantage in a quickly changing world,” said **Geoffrey Garin, president of Peter D. Hart Research Associates**. “Right now, far more Americans perceive us as falling behind other countries in this regard than see us as taking the lead.”

The poll finds overwhelming support that the twenty-first-century economy requires new thinking in how students are educated, with 80 percent saying that the things students need to learn in school today are different than they were twenty years ago. Unfortunately, voters also realize that American schools are not keeping pace, with only 38 percent saying that schools have done a good job of keeping up with changing educational needs. Among the good things that schools are doing, participants mentioned teaching computer literacy and technology skills but added that schools were neither preparing students to be “workforce ready” nor providing them with the breadth of skills needed to succeed in today’s world.

Specifically, the poll asked voters to rate a series of fourteen skills on how important the skills were and how well schools were teaching these skills. It finds a substantial gap between how important voters perceive each skill and how well they believe schools are actually teaching that skill. For example, 85 percent think that “reading comprehension” is an important skill, but only 22 percent of those surveyed think that schools teach it well. Similar gaps were found in “written communications” (78 percent think it is important; 17 percent think it is taught well), “critical thinking and problem solving” (80 percent say it is important; 18 percent say it is taught well), and “creativity and innovation” (73 percent say it is important; 19 percent say it is taught well).

In total, 66 percent of those surveyed say that America’s students need more than just the basics and need to be taught a broader range of skills.

“We all recognize that U.S. education can and should be doing more to prepare our young people to succeed in the twenty-first century,” **Ken Kay, president of the Partnership for Twenty-first Century Skills**. “Skills such as problem solving, innovation and creativity have become critical in today’s global economy. Integrating twenty-first century skills into the teaching of

core academic subjects is a win-win proposition for everyone involved. It's now clear that U.S. voters understand this. And it's up to every one of us to ensure our children receive them."

Complete results from poll are available at <http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/>.

### **Drop (Out) and Give Me Twenty: Fewer than 80 Percent of Recent Army Recruits Have a High School Diploma**

According to an October 12 *Chicago Tribune* article, the percentage of U.S. Army recruits with a high school diploma has plummeted in the past four years, from 94 percent in 2003 to below 80 percent in 2007. During this same period, more enlistees with criminal records were also accepted, due in large part to the increase in "character" waivers granted to recruits. More than 11 percent of enlistees required these waivers as a result of problems with the law, a percentage twice that of 2003.

In the article, **Major General Thomas Bostick**, commander of the U.S. Army Recruiting Command, said that 87 percent of those granted waivers had misdemeanors for offenses such as joyriding and violating curfew. Moreover, the article reports that the number of enlistees with past felony charges and arrests has more than tripled since 2003, from 459 to 1,650.

"This is a recipe for disaster," **Lawrence Korb**, a senior fellow at the **Center for American Progress**, said of the lowering of Army standards. A former assistant secretary of defense during the Reagan administration, Korb added, "In the long term this can be a serious problem for the military."

**Beth Asch**, a senior economist and expert on military recruitment and retention at the **Rand Corporation**, expressed greater concern at the drop in the number of recruits with diplomas than the increase in those granted waivers. "One reason you don't bring in non-grads is they tend not to complete things," Asch said. "People who are better educated tend to be learners and the military needs lifelong learners."

"U.S. Army lowers its recruiting standards" is available at <http://www.chicagotribune.com/services/newspaper/printedition/thursday/chi-recruit11oct11,0,614332.story?coll.>



### **THE PROFICIENCY ILLUSION: New Report Finds Definition of Proficiency on State Tests Varies by State, Year, Subject, and Grade Level**

States vary greatly in their requirements for what students need to know to score at the proficient level on state tests, according to *The Proficiency Illusion*, a new report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA). The report finds that, because of this variance, the results on state tests are creating a false impression of success, especially in reading and in the early grades.

"NCLB rests on quicksand. We're supposed to think that it is providing greater transparency about the performance of students, teachers, and schools," said **Chester E. Finn Jr.**, **president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute**. "In fact, the very opposite is happening: proficiency standards in math and reading vary erratically, almost randomly, from state to state, grade to grade, year to year. Parents cannot be sure that they are getting accurate feedback on how their children are really doing in school—or how their kids' school, school system or state is really doing."

## ***The Proficiency Illusion***

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In performing the analysis, NWEA experts used a mapping exercise to project state “cut scores,” or the level needed to pass the test for the purposes of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), onto the scale used by the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), a test used by twenty-six states for diagnostic and accountability purposes. Specifically, the NWEA researchers used the point on a state test at which 70 percent of the study group performed above the state proficiency cut score to the point on the MAP scale that was met or exceeded by 70 percent of the study group.

The decision to use the MAP test over the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was made because NAEP tests are given only at three grade levels—fourth, eighth, and twelfth—and because of questions about student motivations for NAEP, which does not report individual- or school-level results. MAP, on the other hand, is given in grades three through eight, is reported to parents, and is aligned to individual states’ curriculum standards.

In examining grade three reading cut scores, NWEA researchers have found that states ranged from the seventh percentile (Colorado) to the sixty-first percentile (California) on the NWEA scale. The report notes that the difference in expectations are “striking” and adds that the “difficulty in the reading passages ... range[s] from something that could be found in a second grade reader to a passage from Tolstoy.”

At the eighth-grade level, the score at which a student would be considered proficient on a state reading test compared to the equivalent score on MAP ranges from the fourteenth percentile (Colorado) to the seventy-first percentile (South Carolina). The report also finds that twenty-three states possess an average score required for proficiency that would fall below the fiftieth percentile on MAP.

NWEA experts also examined math proficiency cut scores in grades three and eight. They find that the range of proficiency cut scores in third grade math went from the sixth percentile (Colorado and Michigan) to the seventy-first percentile (South Carolina). At the eighth-grade level, proficiency cut scores in math ranged from the twentieth percentile (Illinois) to the seventy-fifth percentile (South Carolina).

Using the average rank of state cut scores across all grades, the report indicates that Maine, California, and South Carolina generally have the most challenging tests in reading, whereas Colorado, Wisconsin, and Michigan had the least challenging. In math, California, Massachusetts, and South Carolina have the highest standards while Colorado, Illinois, and Michigan had the lowest.

The report also finds that standards for mathematics are generally more difficult to meet than those for reading. For example, in Massachusetts the math cut score is set to the sixty-seventh percentile for eighth-grade students, but the reading cut score is only set at the thirty-first percentile. Consequently, 74 percent of students achieved proficiency in reading, but only 40 percent achieved proficiency in math. The report notes that such disparities can have huge implications for policymakers.

“School systems and policymakers may infer from the resulting differences in performance that students in a given state have some deficiency in mathematics requiring special intervention,” the report reads. “They may act on these kinds of inferences, allocating resources to address seeming gaps in math achievement that may not exist. As a consequence, resources might not be allocated to address problems with reading programs that remain hidden beneath this veneer of seemingly superior performance.”

NWEA experts also find that disparities exist in the tests given in the earlier grades versus those given in the later grades, with reading and math tests in the upper grades consistently more difficult to pass than those in the earlier grades. Using Minnesota as an example, the report finds that a student who performed at the thirty-fifth percentile on MAP would have been proficient in grades three, four, and five, but not proficient in grades six, seven, and eight.

In discussing what the report means for policymakers, Finn and **Michael J. Petrilli, vice president for national programs and policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation**, argue in the foreword to the report that the “testing infrastructure on which so many school reform efforts rest, and in which so much confidence has been vested, is unreliable—at best.” They add that Congress erred “big time” when NCLB allowed each state to set its own standards and devise and score its own tests.

In offering an alternative to the current environment, Finn and Petrilli say that it’s “not crazy” to have some form of national standards. They suggest that the federal government does not have to set national standards, but that it should at least be responsible for ensuring that they get set. They note that the House Education and Labor Committee draft to reauthorize NCLB includes “financial incentives for states that adopt ‘world-class’ standards that imply readiness for work or college,” but also undermines this objective by “slavishly clinging to the ‘100 percent proficient by 2014’ mandate.”

“If Congress wants states like Michigan to aim higher,” they write, “the best thing it can do is to remove this provision from the law. With this perverse incentive out of the way, Michigan just might summon the intestinal fortitude to aim higher—and shoot straighter.”

The complete report is available at <http://edexcellence.net/institute/publication/publication.cfm?id=376>.

***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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