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Public Education Policy And Progress



CONGRESS MOVES FORWARD WITH BUDGET PLAN FOR FY 2008: House and Senate Spending Blueprints Include Significant Increases for Education Programs

Federal spending on education could increase significantly based on the spending blueprints that emerged from the House and Senate over the past two weeks. Although there were slight differences between them, both the House and Senate versions of the fiscal year (FY) 2008 congressional budget resolution would provide increases for the U.S. Department of Education. The next step in the annual budget process is a House-Senate conference in which representatives from both chambers will attempt to iron out their differences. Should a compromise come easily, the final budget plan could be up for a final vote as soon as the week of April 16. Agreeing to a joint budget plan would be a significant achievement; Congress was unable to do so in 2006.

Although it is a nonbinding spending blueprint that is not signed by the president, the congressional budget resolution sets limits on the spending and tax legislation that Congress will consider for the rest of the year. Only the total amount of discretionary spending in the final budget resolution is binding on the appropriations committees. However, the congressional budget resolution can serve as guidance to the chairmen of the appropriations committees on how to divide resources among various federal departments and agencies, and it often sets the stage for the annual appropriations bills.

In the Senate version, which passed by a vote of 52–47 on March 23, the U.S. Department of Education would receive an increase of \$6.1 billion over the president's budget request for FY 2008. Passing the resolution on the Senate floor was especially noteworthy considering the narrow Democratic majority—there are fifty-one Democrats (including two Independents who caucus with the Democrats) and forty-nine Republicans, but **Senator Tim Johnson (D-SD)** continues to recover from the brain hemorrhage he suffered in December and has yet to cast a vote in 2007. In the days leading up to the vote, **Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D-ND)** knew that he would have to draft a budget resolution that would satisfy both fiscal conservative and liberal wings of the Democratic Party. "I can't lose a single vote," he said in the days leading up to the vote.

In the end, Conrad not only received the support of all forty-eight Democrats who were present and of the two Independents, **Senators Bernie Sanders (VT)** and **Joe Lieberman (CT)**; his bill also got the votes of two Republicans, **Senators Susan Collins (R-ME)** and **Olympia Snowe (R-ME)**.

Congress Moves Forward with Budget Plan for FY 2008 (Continued from p. 1)

“[There is] a substantial commitment to education in this budget, which I believe is the top domestic priority beyond defending our country and defending our borders,” Conrad said. “So I am delighted at the result here today. And I think this is a budget that reflects the priorities of the American people. I am proud of this budget.”

House Democrats’ Unity Leads to Passage of the Budget Resolution

Last year, the House of Representatives did not pass its version of the congressional budget resolution until May 18. The delay was attributable not to Democratic interference, but instead to considerable infighting between the conservative and moderate factions of the Republican Party. Whereas conservative Republicans sought to limit spending on discretionary programs such as education and health care, moderate Republicans held out for greater spending for these and other domestic priorities.

This year, in an effort to avoid the intraparty disputes that delayed last year’s congressional budget resolution, **House Budget Chairman John Spratt (D-SC)** reached out to the various factions within the Democratic Party, including the fiscally conservative Blue Dog Democrats.

In a statement prior to the House vote, **Representative Mike Ross (D-AR), a cochairman for Communications for the Democratic Blue Dog Coalition**, expressed satisfaction with the budget resolution. “I applaud Chairman Spratt for his commitment to two principles we as Blue Dogs believe are essential if a government is to be accountable to its people—a strong national defense and fiscal responsibility.”

Because of Chairman Spratt’s inclusionary tactics, House Democrats were able to hold onto enough votes from their caucus and pass the budget resolution by a 216–210 margin on March 29. Twelve Democrats voted against the measure, but most waited until passage was assured before voting. As passed by the House, the budget resolution would provide nearly \$8 billion more than President Bush’s budget request for education, job training, and social services.

“This is a balanced budget with balanced priorities,” Spratt said. “It shows that Democrats are fiscally responsible and can budget, and that we are charting a new course for America.” In discussing increased spending for education, health care for veterans, and health insurance for children, Spratt said that these increases “help sustain good programs that work for millions of Americans and good programs that Democrats believe in.”

For their part, Republicans were also unified, but in their case, against the budget resolution, which they said would raise taxes and lead to higher spending. “The best way to balance the budget is to control spending, not raise taxes,” said **Representative Paul Ryan (R-WI), the top Republican on the House Budget Committee**. “We can and should balance the budget without raising taxes. Regrettably, the Democrats’ budget plan amounts to the largest tax hike in American history, and it still doesn’t get to the heart of the problem—the fact that [the] government is spending taxpayer dollars at an unsustainable rate. In fact, this budget proposal piles on a lot more new spending and doesn’t even attempt meaningful entitlement reforms.”

U.S. Department of Education Announces Funding Levels for FY 2007

As 2006 came to a close, Congress had only passed two of the eleven Fiscal Year (FY) 2007 appropriations bills. At that point, the Republican leadership passed a temporary funding resolution that postponed final decisions on education spending until February 2007. On February 14—over four months after the first day of the fiscal year—Congress passed and President Bush signed a resolution that allocated funds to the U.S. Department of Education. Because of the delay, the department was unable to provide final funding levels for individual programs until late last month.

According to the FY 2007 operating plan that the department released on March 20, several programs will receive an increase in funding over FY 2006. Among them, Title I will receive a \$130 million increase, spending on special education will increase by \$200 million, and funding for the Striving Readers program will increase by about \$2 million. Also, the maximum Pell grant award will increase from \$4,050 to \$4,310, the first such increase in four years.

In addition, the Title I School Improvement Fund, which is funded for the first time, will receive \$125 million that will be targeted to the 6,700 schools that failed to meet No Child Left Behind requirements in the 2005–2006 school year. Schools will use these funds to implement improvement activities, such as teacher training, tutoring programs, and curriculum upgrades.

A chart of selected education programs and their funding levels for FY 2007 is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/legislative/FY08budget.html>. The chart also includes the amounts that programs would receive under the budget proposal that President Bush submitted on February 5.



STRIVING READERS ACT INTRODUCED IN U.S. SENATE: Bill Seeks to Improve Reading Skills of Older Students

On March 22, U.S. Senators **Jeff Sessions (R-AL)** and **Patty Murray (D-WA)** introduced new legislation that would provide grants to every state for reading and comprehension programs to meet the needs of students in grades 4–12. Senators **John Kerry (D-MA)**, **Thad Cochran (R-MS)**, **Daniel Akaka (D-HI)**, **Trent Lott (R-MI)**, **Christopher Dodd (D-CT)**, **Richard Burr (R-NC)**, **Jeff Bingaman (D-NM)**, **Blanche Lincoln (D-AR)**, and **Pete Domenici (R-NM)** joined them as original cosponsors of the legislation.

“The Striving Readers Act will place a significant concentration on improving the reading capabilities of our older students,” said Sessions. “With 70 percent of our middle and high school students reading below grade level, we need to help them develop the reading skills and knowledge they need to succeed in all courses. This initiative will focus on advanced vocabulary and comprehension skills so that all of our students will be prepared to meet the demands of the 21st century.”

Called the Striving Readers Act, or S.958, the legislation would help ensure that older students who are struggling to read and write at grade level receive the literacy interventions they need to succeed in school and graduate from high school with a meaningful diploma. Specifically, it would help states create statewide literacy initiatives for students in grades 4–12, share data on student progress with parents and the public, and improve teacher training and professional development in literacy so that all students receive high-quality instruction. It would also allow schools and districts to hire and place literacy coaches, train parents to support the literacy development of their child, and connect learning inside the classroom with learning that takes place outside the classroom.

Striving Readers Act Introduced in U.S. Senate (Continued from p. 3)

“The Striving Readers Act is a landmark bill that focuses federal dollars on teen literacy for the very first time,” Murray said. “Reading is the core to learning, but too many of our students make it past the lower grades without the literacy skills needed to succeed in school. Striving Readers invests in helping our older students improve their reading skills so they can reach graduation and succeed in life.”

First funded at \$24.8 million as a Title I demonstration program in fiscal year (FY) 2005, the Striving Readers program has seen small increases in recent years but has yet to see the funding that would allow its reach to extend beyond a handful of school districts. If signed into law, the Striving Readers Act would authorize \$200 million in FY 2008, with increased funding through FY 2012, which would allow the program to expand to every state.

Brief Funding History of the Striving Readers Program

Fiscal Year	President Bush’s Budget Request	Final Authorization
2005	\$100 million	\$24.8 million
2006	\$200 million	\$29.7 million
2007	\$100 million	\$31.9 million
2008	\$100 million	To be determined

Currently, only eight programs nationwide receive funding under the program—even though the U.S. Department of Education received close to one hundred applications in the initial competition. Additional grants are unlikely without a corresponding increase in funding. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education announced last week that it will use FY 2007 funds to continue to support the eight Striving Readers projects that were first funded in March 2006 and will not hold a new competition for additional awards in 2007.

“Because federal commitment to reading disappears after the third grade, this legislation is essential for focusing attention on the older student so that everyone stays in school and crosses the commencement stage with a diploma in hand,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia.**

More information on the Striving Readers Act is available in Senator Sessions’s press release, which can be found at <http://sessions.senate.gov/pressapp/record.cfm?id=271130>.



REALIZING A COMPETITIVE EDUCATION: Alliance President Bob Wise Testifies Before Senate Finance Committee

On March 20, Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise testified before the U. S. Senate Committee on Finance at a hearing entitled “Realizing a Competitive Education: Identifying Needs, Partnerships, and Resources.”

In his opening statement, **Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-MT)** discussed the challenges that the nation needs to meet for the future and the role that education can play in helping to meet them.

“America faces a world more integrated, more interdependent, and more competitive, than ever,” Baucus said. “It is our challenge to succeed in this new environment. It is our challenge to create an economy in which investment in our youth is our greatest asset—not our heaviest burden. It is our challenge to leave our children and grandchildren with an economy that is better than the one that we inherited. We must meet this challenge. And meeting this challenge begins with addressing education.”

In his testimony, Wise discussed how the nation’s economy and global competitiveness are adversely impacted by the country’s low graduation rates and poorly prepared high school graduates. He said that the dropout crisis was an “obvious problem for students and parents, but also a major concern to America’s citizens, businesses, and elected officials.” Citing a recent analysis by the Alliance for Excellent Education, Wise said that if the 1.2 million high school dropouts from the Class of 2006 had stayed in school and earned their diplomas, the U.S. economy would have seen an additional \$309 billion in wages over these students’ lifetimes.

“The realities of global competitiveness, the rapidly diminishing prospects of those students whose high schools fail to prepare them for college and work, and the resulting widening opportunity gap all make high school reform an imperative from an economic, national security, and civil rights perspective,” Wise said. “The time is right for the federal government to take bold leadership in advancing high school reform—leadership that is appropriate to the crisis and in line with the federal government’s tradition of intervening to ensure the security of the nation, reduce poverty, increase equity, and advance research to inform effective practice.”

In outlining steps that the federal government could take to address high school reform, Wise said that the renewal of the No Child Left Behind Act provided Congress with the opportunity to ensure that all children receive a high-quality education that prepares them for the twenty-first century. Specifically, he called for targeting federal funds to improve low-performing secondary schools, meaningful accountability around high school graduation rates, and a greater focus on improving every child’s ability to read and write at grade level.

Other witnesses at the hearing included **Jane Karas, president of Flathead Valley Community College in Kalispell, MT; Accenture Chairman and Chief Executive Officer William D. Green; Greg Taylor, vice president for programs, youth and education at the Kellogg Foundation; Patty Myers, a teacher at Lewis and Clark Elementary in Great Falls, MT; and Steven L. Paine, West Virginia’s superintendent of schools.**

Wise’s complete testimony, as well as audio and video of the hearing, is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/SenateFinance.html>.



VOICES ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: Survey of High School Students Reveals Boredom, Lack of Engagement

High school students are often bored and disengaged during school hours and spend relatively little time on schoolwork or preparing for classes in their free time, according to a recent report from Indiana University’s High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE). The report, *Voices on Student Engagement*, also found that nearly one in four high school students has considered dropping out of high school.

Voices on Student Engagement (Continued from p. 5)

“The fact that this many students have considered dropping out of high school makes the numbers of dropouts that we actually see across the country—and the supposed dropout crisis that we have—not surprising,” said **Ethan Yazzie-Mintz, HSSSE project director for the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP)**. “I think schools definitely need to pay a lot more attention to what students are thinking and the reasons why they’re dropping out.”

When given the opportunity to list reasons for why they wanted to drop out, 60 percent of respondents said that they did not see value in the work that they were being asked to do. Other reasons they gave for considering dropping out included family issues (42 percent), the need to get a job (35 percent), the feeling that no adults in the school cared about them (24 percent), and that the work was too easy (19 percent).

The study also reveals that students who stay in high school often do so just so they can finish and move on to college, not because they actually want to learn the material being taught in their classes. In fact, 73 percent agreed that they went to high school so that they could go to college, versus only 39 percent who went because of what they learn in their classes. Interestingly, 58 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that they went to school “because it’s the law.”

Given that such a high percentage were in high school solely so they could go to college, it was interesting to see that only 35 percent of respondents said that they were in “Honors/College Prep/Advanced” classes. Meanwhile, 41 percent described their academic track as “General/Regular,” 7 percent said that they were in career or vocational classes, and 3 percent said they were in special education. About 15 percent did not know if they were in a specific academic track.

The survey also reveals that students spend little time on homework or preparing for class outside of school during a typical seven-day week. In fact, 43 percent of respondents said that they spent less than one hour a week on written homework, and over 50 percent said that they spent less than one hour a week reading or studying for class. On the other hand, nearly one in three respondents reported spending more than six hours a week watching television or playing video games.

At the end of the survey, students were given the opportunity to expand on their answers. For this section, some students explained why they did not spend much time studying. “In question 15 and 16, the answers given may project me as a bad, non-studying student,” one student wrote. “I study not because I need not. High school is boring.”

“Our school needs to be more challenging,” said another. “Students fall asleep because the classes aren’t really that interesting.”

Nearly 81,500 students in 110 schools from twenty-six states responded to the survey. The average student enrollment at a school that participated in the survey was 1,010, although schools’ enrollment ranged from thirty-seven students to over 3,800.

The complete survey is available at <http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/>.



GETTING DOWN TO FACTS: California School Finance Study Calls for Mix of Additional Money and Reform

Providing a quality education for all of California's students will require a mix of significant new money combined with comprehensive reform in the state's education governance and finance systems. So says *Getting Down to Facts*, a collection of reports that were requested by **California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's (R)** Advisory Committee on Education Excellence.

Exactly how much additional money would be needed differed among the studies. In one, **Jon Sonstelie, a senior fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California**, suggests that even with a 40 percent increase in spending, more than half of California's schools would still fall short of the state's goal score of 800 on its Academic Performance Index.

"California's schools may require substantially more resources to meet student achievement goals," said **Susanna Loeb, associate professor at Stanford University and the leader of the research project**. "But the research findings of all 22 studies are clear: that to have an impact, increased funding must go hand-in-hand with reforms."

Although they used different methodologies, researchers came to similar conclusions on what kinds of reforms were needed. Among their suggestions were that the state give local schools more flexibility in their use of funding, remove barriers that make it difficult to fire ineffective teachers, and improve data collection so that officials can determine whether the money they are spending is making any difference.

"This research provides the most comprehensive information to date on what it will take to improve student achievement for all students," said **Christy Pichel, president of the Stuart Foundation**, one of the project's funders. "Whether policymakers use this information to improve student achievement is something all Californians will be watching very closely."

Getting Down to Facts includes twenty-two studies by more than thirty researchers from the nation's leading universities and research institutions. Funding support was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and the Stuart Foundation. The project represents the latest chapter in California's school finance debate that began over thirty-five years ago when the California Supreme Court said that education was a fundamental right under the state's constitution. That decision is generally regarded as the first of the modern-day education finance litigation decisions.

The full set of twenty-two studies, as well as an overview paper, is available at <http://irepp.stanford.edu/projects/cafinance.htm>.

Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both in Washington, DC, and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America's secondary school students to achieve high standards.



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