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Public Education Policy And Progress



“SETTING THE STAGE FOR NEW HIGH SCHOOLS”: Alliance, National League of Cities Cohost Capitol Hill Briefing on Alternative High Schools

On July 10, **Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN)** and **Nashville Mayor Karl Dean** appeared at a Capitol Hill briefing to discuss the importance of ensuring that all students—including those who are struggling, those at risk of dropping out, and those who may have left school—are prepared for college and success in the workforce. The briefing, titled “Setting the Stage for New High Schools: Expanding Alternatives to High School to Ensure that All Students Become College and Work Ready,” was cohosted by the Alliance for Excellent Education and the National League of Cities and focused on a leading-edge group of cities that are establishing partnerships to develop high-quality alternative high schools.

“We still have in our country a remarkable economic engine,” Alexander said. “We’re still the grand champion in technology and education. ... But the competition is getting fierce. Other countries around the world want the same standard of living we have. They understand it has a lot to do with developing their brain power...we in the United States need to make sure over the next decade or two that we maintain our competitive advantage.”

He explained that Congress has tried to develop a framework for meeting this goal through the passage of the America Competes Act, a bipartisan law that focuses on improved student performance in math and science. Alexander said that the law provides support for low-income students to take Advanced Placement courses, trains teachers to better prepare students to take the tests, and provides support to train more math and science teachers as well as to better train those who are already teaching in those fields.

Dean said Nashville is a strong city with a diverse economy that includes everything from health care to publishing to the music industry, but he also acknowledged that it has issues with its schools.

“Nashville is a great city; we’ve benefitted from good government...we’re a city on the rise, but we have not focused adequately on education,” he said. “There is a connection between schools and keeping kids in schools and having reduced crime and a safer city. If you have a safer city and good schools, you’re going to see economic development. Those three things are just intrinsically connected.”

Dean also talked about his work designed to reduce the dropout rate and keep more students in school. His efforts include appointing a task force to study the issue (see box on page 3),

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working with the National League of Cities to develop alternative high schools, and reaching out to different models and programs around the country—such as charter schools and Teach for America—to learn more about best practices and how to use them. He also included money in his budget to develop an “Attendance Center.”

“Truancy is something that is the number one indicator [of whether] a student is going to drop out of school,” he said. “The Attendance Center is in-between the juvenile courts, the schools, and the police. It’s where kids can be brought when they’re loitering or they’re truant, where there will be social workers and teachers who will find out what the real problem is...and get them back on the right track.”

Dean explained that his emphasis on truancy and dropout rates stems from his work as a public defender. “When I was doing adult criminal work, I would represent tons of people in a given day,” he said. “Every one of them except for just a few were high school dropouts—and I’m talking hundreds of people. I’m not saying that’s the only issue, but there is clearly a correlation.”

He added that he often worked with juveniles, particularly with youth accused of very serious crimes. “All of those kids that I saw in juvenile—whether it was the serious cases or the less serious delinquent-type cases—were chronically truant. I think the city has a responsibility to pay attention to that issue all of the time and keep those kids in schools. ...There are no throw-away people in our society. We are not going to be satisfied until all of our schools have graduation rates in the 90th percentile.”

Other featured speakers at the briefing included **Elliot Washor, codirector of the Big Picture Company**, an organization that began with the design of The Met, a high school in Rhode Island, and has continued to create radically different schools across the country through the Alternative High School Initiative (AHSI). As one of the most recent cities selected to join the initiative, Nashville will partner with AHSI to reduce dropout rates and improve students’ educational outcomes. Part of that work will include helping the city establish several innovation-model high schools, with new schools debuting as soon as the 2009–2010 school year.

Washor talked about his experiences in different alternative schools around the country and on the importance of longitudinal studies that follow students through high school and into college. He explained that the Big Picture Company schools not only measure students’ success in college, but school staff also get involved with students and continued to stay in contact with them through college—a vital support considering that, nationwide, only 10 percent of low-income, minority students graduate from college.

Also on hand was **Cliff Johnson, executive director of the National League of Cities (NLC) Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF)**, which helps to develop the content of AHSI convenings and guide the evolution of the network. Johnson talked about the dropout crisis underway in cities throughout the nation and the important role that mayors can play in

helping to reduce dropout rates. **Audrey Hutchinson, program director at the National League of Cities**, discussed what it meant to be an alternative high school and shared the findings from *Setting the Stage for New High Schools: Municipal Leadership in Supporting High School Alternatives*, a November 2007 report by the YEF Institute. The report examines how mayors and other municipal leaders in seven cities across the country (Atlanta, GA; Boston, MA; Corpus Christi, TX; Hartford, CT; Phoenix, AZ; San Jose, CA; and Seattle, WA) are expanding alternatives for students who struggle in traditional high school settings.

Setting the Stage for New High Schools: Municipal Leadership in Supporting High School Alternatives is available at

http://www.nlc.org/ASSETS/8D1C9C4738C7419DAE8060B73828827D/IYEF_Setting_the_Stage.pdf.

More information on the Capitol Hill event, including complete audio and video coverage, is available at http://www.all4ed.org/events/Alliance_NLC.

Project for Student Success: Task Force Examines Dropout Problem in Nashville

In December 2007, Nashville Mayor Karl Dean created a forty-member task force called Project for Student Success and charged it with developing action steps to reduce Nashville's dropout rate. On June 25, the task force issued its final report.

"A student doesn't just wake up one day and decide not to go back to school," Dean said. "It's clear from the work of the task force and other research in this area that the path to dropping out can start as early as elementary and middle school."

One of the report's major themes is the need for Nashville schools to move from a focus on remediation to one of identification and prevention. As it notes, "Many of the issues with students, parents, and teachers today are the consequences and results of the risk factors and the inability to remediate them after the fact." To better identify at-risk students before they drop out, the commission recommends a protocol for tracking student absences and a much more robust database to house both academic and nonacademic student data, including facts about student mobility and parental education level.

Turning its attention to teachers, the task force recommends continuous and rigorous professional development for teachers and administrators who teach in schools with chronically poor academic performance. It also calls for incentives for teachers and administrators in low-performing schools who demonstrated gains in test scores, attendance, and graduation rates.

The report also focuses on the importance of family and community in ensuring that a student graduates from high school. To increase this type of involvement in schools, the task force suggests that the city start a faith-based community collaboration between government support agencies and thirty faith-based social support sites that are located in hot spots for crime and truancy. It also calls for a districtwide "First Day Celebration" that would allow parents and families to meet with school personnel in an informal environment and also feature community agencies to provide other needed information, such as tutoring options or job assistance.

The task force also notes a lack of coordination between the many youth programs that are operating in the city and that there are few such programs for middle and high school students. It offers several recommendations concerning access to high-quality afterschool and summer programs and learning opportunities.

It also calls for greater outreach to disengaged youth and young adults who have already dropped out of school and opportunities for these individuals to earn a high school diploma or GED.

More information on the report is available at http://www.nashville.gov/mocyp/project_student_success.htm.



KIDS' SHARE 2008: Report Finds Federal Spending on Children's Programs Getting the Squeeze

Although federal spending for children's programs has increased in actual dollar amounts and as a percentage of GDP since 1960, the percentage of the federal domestic budget spent on children has decreased, according to *Kids' Share 2008: How Children Fare in the Federal Budget*, a new report from the Urban Institute and the New America Foundation.¹ Looking ahead to 2018, the report finds that federal spending on children will continue to shrink as a percentage of domestic spending unless major adjustments are made to current policy and budget trends, especially if spending on entitlements continues to spiral out of control.

"The squeeze between growing entitlements and existing taxes—a squeeze affecting children's programs and many traditional government functions—is not waiting for some future date; it is taking place now," said **Eugene Steuerle, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute and one of the report's authors.** "By action and inaction, both political parties bear responsibility for choosing this path and for allowing other priorities to take precedence."

According to the report, which defines children as individuals under nineteen who are not in postsecondary education, federal spending on children, adjusted for inflation, grew from \$55 billion in 1960 to \$354 billion in 2007. But although federal spending on children has grown dramatically, it makes up a smaller portion of domestic federal spending in 2007 (16.2 percent) than it did nearly fifty years ago (20.2 percent).

During the same time period, however, spending on nonchild Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid more than doubled, growing from 21.9 percent to 49.1 percent of domestic spending. As a result, real federal spending on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid rose from \$3,057 per senior in 1960 to \$20,530 in 2005, compared to \$819 and \$4,680 per child.

The report also finds that federal spending on children's programs grew as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), but not nearly at the same pace as spending on entitlement programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, which tended to outpace both growth in the economy and inflation. From 1960 to 2007, entitlement spending grew from 2.0 to 7.9 percent of GDP, whereas federal spending on children rose from 1.9 to 2.6 percent of GDP. And of the eight major budget categories that spend money on children that were featured in the report, only health, which grew 4.5 percent in real terms, gained ground relative to the economy. Education, which actually fell 2.1 percent in real terms, lost the most ground.²

Assuming that current policy and budget trends continue, the report predicts that spending on children should increase in real dollar amounts from 2007 to 2018, but that its portion of domestic spending will continue to decrease as entitlement spending continues to eat away at the rest of the budget. Specifically, it says that children's spending in real dollar terms will increase

¹ Domestic federal spending excludes spending on defense, homeland security, and international affairs.

² The report divides federal programs that spend money on children into eight major budget categories: income security (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), nutrition (food stamps), housing (low-income home energy assistance), tax credits and exemptions (child tax credit), health (Children's Health Insurance Program), social services (Head Start), education (Education for the Disadvantaged), and training (Workforce Investment Act).

by 15.5 percent from 2007 to 2018, compared to a 63 percent increase for the adult portions of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.

Consequently, the report estimates that domestic spending on children in 2018 will represent just 13.8 percent of federal domestic spending, down from 16.2 percent in 2007. Meanwhile, spending on the nonchild portions of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid will consume 59.2 percent of domestic spending by 2018.

“It is clear that, absent *major* adjustments to our current way of doing business, we are rapidly approaching the day when there will be *no federal dollars left* for any program outside the three major entitlements, plus defense, international affairs, and interest on the debt,” the report reads. “If more people pay higher taxes, or some of the president’s recent proposals to cut Medicare growth are enacted, or the defense budget falls by more than projected, then the squeeze is lessened. The budget pressures will not go away, however, without major reforms to both revenues and spending.”

The complete report is available at
http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411699_kids_share_08_report.pdf.

First Focus Report Finds Similar Trend: Only One Penny of Every New Domestic Federal Dollar Goes to Children

Only one penny of every new, real, nondefense dollar spent by the federal government over the past five years goes to children. So says *Children’s Budget 2008*, a recent report from First Focus, a bipartisan children’s advocacy organization. In an analysis of how appropriations levels have changed for more than 180 federally funded programs that are geared toward children, First Focus finds that just 1 percent of all new spending since Fiscal Year 2004 is helping children.

“We embarked on this project to identify the standing of our children in the federal budget and were shocked by the results,” said Bruce Lesley, president of First Focus. “Despite increases in federal spending over the past five years, the share for children has dropped dramatically. Virtually every program that benefits kids depends on a core federal investment that has diminished in recent years.”

According to the report, overall spending on children increased by about 1.4 percent over the past five years, but was easily outpaced by total federal nondefense spending, which grew at a rate nearly ten times faster. Discretionary programs that benefit children fared even worse, declining by 6.7 percent compared to a 5.9 percent *increase* for total federal domestic spending. Consequently, federal discretionary spending on children declined from 16.8 percent of all nondefense discretionary funding in 2004 to 14.8 percent in 2008.

Spending on children’s education, child welfare, and youth training were affected even more, declining by 9.9 percent, 11.5 percent, and 14.9 percent, respectively, in real dollars since 2004.

The complete report is available at <http://www.firstfocus.net/pages/3391/>.



SCHWARZENEGGER IS X FACTOR IN MATH DEBATE: California Governor's Influence Leads State Board to Mandate Testing Every Eighth Grader in Algebra

Every eighth-grade student in California will be tested in algebra under a policy approved on July 9 by the California Board of Education. The action, which is scheduled to take effect within three years, could make California the first state in the nation to require an upper-level math class in middle school.

Originally, the board had been scheduled to vote on a new eighth-grade math test proposed by **Jack O'Connell**, the **California superintendent of public instruction**. But the night before, **Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (R)** issued a letter asking for the more rigorous test. The board granted Schwarzenegger's request the next day, voting eight to one to adopt his recommendation.

"I have always been a staunch supporter of high academic standards in California," Schwarzenegger wrote in the letter. "I am asking the State Board to do away with the below grade-level General Mathematics test and chart California's course to lead the nation in 8th grade math. I stand committed to ensuring schools have the resources needed to prepare every 8th grader to take an Algebra I standardized test."

In the letter, Schwarzenegger calls algebra the "gateway to critical thinking, pivotal for success in science, engineering and technology" and says that the board had a choice between "high expectations" or "a two-track system: one for high achievers and one for those of whom we expect less."

Reaction to the decision was decidedly mixed. Proponents hailed it as one that will push school districts to ensure that eighth graders are ready for algebra. Others said that the three-year time frame was too unrealistic.

According to the Associated Press, O'Connell "blasted Schwarzenegger during the nearly four-hour hearing, saying he had never seen such meddling by a governor at the last minute on a policy change that deserved rigorous public debate." He criticized Schwarzenegger for "never [taking] the time to weigh in until last night on a policy that will have significant impact on literally tens of thousands of students" in California.

In his letter, Schwarzenegger maintains that the number of California eighth graders taking Algebra I has increased from 34 percent to 52 percent since 2003, compared with just 30 percent of eighth graders nationwide. At the hearing, O'Connell countered by saying that only about 23 percent score at the proficient level or above on standardized tests, with even smaller percentages of African American, Hispanic, and low-income students reaching proficient.

The vote became necessary after U.S. Department of Education officials discovered that California's existing math test for students not enrolled in Algebra I did not follow the rules of the No Child Left Behind Act because it tested sixth- and seventh-grade math but was administered in eighth grade. At that point, the department said that California had to change its current eighth-grade math test by August 1 or face losing up to \$4.1 million in federal funding.

In response to the vote, **Holly Kuzmich, deputy chief of staff to U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings**, told the *Los Angeles Times*, “Education policy is leading us to getting kids access to algebra by the eighth grade, and we know that’s what leads kids to jobs and college,” she said. “We are delighted at the governor’s push for high standards.” (The link for the *Los Angeles Times* article is in the box below.)

Business leaders were also supportive of the decision and had lobbied for a more rigorous test for months. “This \$1 million proposed ‘algebra light’ alternative test will be a disaster for California kids and teachers,” said **Jim Lanich, president of California Business for Education Excellence**, before the vote. “It will be a watering down of academic standards. . . . It will institutionalize a lower expectation for minority and low-income kids.”

A copy of Governor Schwarzenegger’s letter is available at http://gov.ca.gov/pdf/press/Board_of_Education_Algebra_I_Standards_FINAL.pdf.

Two Sides to Every Equation: Different Takes on the Algebra Ruling

In the days after the California Board of Education’s vote to require every eighth grader to be tested in algebra, the *Sacramento Bee* profiled several individuals who use algebra in their everyday life and asked how it affected them.

According to **Johnnie Powell, a forecaster with the National Weather Service**, it was algebra that opened the door to a career he enjoys every day. “When I read the story, I had to think about it,” Powell said. “I know it’s going to be difficult for some students. But then I realized it will only help them in the future. That’s what happened to me.”

Structural engineer Kit Miyamoto agreed. “I use algebra every day, every day,” said Miyamoto. “It’s the basics of mathematics and it gives you logical sense.”

Unlike Powell and Miyamoto, **Les Bowman, a redevelopment manager for the city of West Sacramento**, does not use algebra every day, but he still understands its importance. “You know, we don’t do a lot of algebra in our office,” he said. “But it really does affect your critical thinking. And the language creeps in all the time. People are always saying things like, ‘You’re only looking at one side of the equation.’”

But for every person like Powell or Miyamoto are people like **Lucila Zetino, a summer school student at Monroe High in North Hills**. Zetino was part of an early push to get all students into algebra in eighth grade, but she failed the algebra then and has every time since. Now eighteen, she is attending classes after her senior year, determined to pass the course and earn her high school diploma. She tells the *Los Angeles Times* that she started struggling with math in seventh grade. In eighth grade algebra, Zetino’s teacher quit and was replaced by a long line of substitutes. “I don’t think I was prepared. I think they just, like, pushed me into algebra. . . . Math was like a different language I never understood. I felt hopeless.”

“Is algebra useless? Not to these folks” is available at <http://www.sacbee.com/101/story/1075680.html>.

“California mandates testing every eighth-grader in algebra—ready or not” is available at <http://www.latimes.com/news/education/la-me-algebra10-2008jul10,0,4202416.story>.

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