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CONGRESS PUNTS EDUCATION FUNDING DECISION TO 2009: Education and Other Domestic Priorities Frozen While Defense and Homeland Security Receive Large Increases

In the final days before the start of the new fiscal year, Congress enacted a massive stopgap spending bill for Fiscal Year (FY) 2009 that postpones most spending decisions until next year. The bill, which freezes nearly all domestic spending at 2008 levels, but provides spending increases for the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, military construction, and veterans' affairs, will keep the government running until March 6, 2009.

The decision to delay spending decisions was not a surprise. As early as February, when President Bush unveiled a FY 2009 budget that proposed an overall freeze on funding for the U.S. Department of Education and other domestic priorities, Democrats in Congress said that they would rather postpone the spending debate than repeat the months of partisan wrangling, veto threats, and veto override attempts that they went through in 2007.

“The president had us over a barrel last year on the appropriations bills because we did not want another continuing resolution [CR],” said **Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) following the unveiling of the president’s budget.** “But he does not have us over a barrel this year because either Senator Clinton or Senator Obama will be the president in less than a year. If we have to deal with a CR next year, we will deal with it. ... I look forward to working with our colleagues and hope we can do a better job with our appropriations bills than last year. But I repeat, we are not going to be held hostage by the unreasonableness of the White House. I hope we can work together and get some bills passed.”

In a budget hearing with **U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings** on February 26, **Representative David Obey (D-WI), chairman of the House Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education Appropriations Subcommittee**, expressed hope that a compromise with the president could be reached, but also cautioned that he would not waste the time of the Congress or of the Appropriations Committee if the president would not negotiate. “Do we want to work things out, or do we just want to wait until the next president will act like an adult?” Obey asked. “We won’t waste time if the president intends to stick by his budget.”

In mid-June, the stark differences between Congress and President Bush became more clear when Congress passed a budget plan that rejected numerous funding cuts in the Bush budget while also increasing spending for certain domestic priorities. As a result, the difference between

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the overall spending total in the president's budget and the Congressional plan was about \$20 billion.

On June 26, the Senate Appropriations Committee passed a Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill that would have provided the U.S. Department of Education with \$61.8 billion, an increase of \$2.6 billion over the president's budget. Among individual programs, the Senate committee would have provided \$14.5 billion for Title I, an increase of \$630 million, and \$100 million for statewide data systems, an increase of \$51.1 million. (A chart that outlines how other education programs would have been funded is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/Fiscal09ProgramChart.pdf>.)

The House version of the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill would have provided \$64 billion for the U.S. Department of Education, an increase of \$4.8 billion over last year. But instead of passing its version of the bill on June 26, the committee adjourned after **Representative Jerry Lewis (R-CA), the ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee**, offered an amendment to strip the text from the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill and replace it with the text from the appropriations bill for the U.S. Department of the Interior. **House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey (D-WI)** called the move a "cheap political stunt;" Lewis maintained that the passage of the Interior bill would help alleviate rising gas prices before the Fourth of July.

In the end, neither the bill approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee nor the one that was shelved by the House Subcommittee on Labor, HHS, and Education ever reached the Senate or House floors. Instead, on September 30, the day before the new fiscal year, the president signed a continuing resolution that will keep most of the government running at current funding levels. However, the bill did specify increases for certain programs and agencies. For example, the Department of Defense will receive a \$28.4 billion increase (6 percent), the Department of Homeland Security will receive a \$2.3 billion increase (6 percent), and military construction and veterans' affairs will receive a \$9 billion increase (5 percent).

The bill also provides \$22.9 billion in emergency funding for relief and recovery in states that have suffered damage from hurricanes, flooding, and wildfires, and an additional \$2.5 billion for the Pell grant program to help pay a portion of the estimated \$6 billion shortfall the program is facing due to increased college enrollment (approximately 800,000 more students have applied for this program this year compared to last year) and changes in eligibility. All other programs, including education and health care, will be funded at their 2008 levels until appropriations bills are passed in early 2009.

Obey defended the decision to postpone decisions on domestic priorities because President Bush has indicated that he would veto any appropriations bills that exceeded his budget request. "We felt that rather than capitulate and make those cuts, we would simply say, 'All right, Mr. President, for the four remaining months that you're in office, we'll be living at your budget level,'" Obey said, "but we will kick the can down the road so if we have a president who will

negotiate like an adult at the end of the road next year, then we will try to cut some compromises that will preserve some of these high-priority areas.”

For their part, Republicans disapproved of the process, which they said denied them the opportunity to properly examine the massive spending measure. “The simple truth is this: Very few people have any idea what’s in [the legislation],” said Lewis. “During this time of economic uncertainty, our constituents are demanding oversight, transparency, and accountability from Wall Street. They deserve the same from Congress.”

Education and the Next President: McCain and Obama Advisors to Debate

On October 21, the education advisors to the presidential candidates will face off in a debate at Teachers College at Columbia University in New York City. The debate will feature **Lisa Graham Keegan, former Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction and advisor to Senator John McCain (R-AZ)**, and **Linda Darling-Hammond, the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University and advisor to Senator Barack Obama (D-IL)**.

The debate is set to begin at 7:00 p.m. EST and will be webcast by *Education Week*. **Susan Fuhrman, president of Teachers College**, will serve as the moderator.

Individuals who want to examine the candidates’ education platforms prior to the debate can do so by visiting the following websites:

Senator McCain: <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Issues/>

Senator Obama: <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/>

To register for the webcast, visit <http://www.edweek.org/ew/index.html> and look for a banner with information on the debate in the upper right corner of the page.



DIPLOMA TO NOWHERE: Report Pegs College Remediation Cost in Excess of \$2 Billion Annually

In 2004, more than 40 percent of all students in two-year public institutions and nearly 30 percent of students at public four-year institutions had to take a remedial course in college, according to *Diploma to Nowhere*, a new report from Strong American Schools. The report finds that more than one million students every year have to take remedial courses in college at a total cost to the nation of more than \$2 billion.

“That is a very large cost, but there is an additional cost and that’s the cost to the students,” said **former Colorado governor Roy Romer, chairman of Strong American Schools**. “These students come out of high school really misled. They think they’re prepared. They got a 3.0 and got through the curriculum they needed to get admitted, but they find what they learned wasn’t adequate.”

Indeed, the report finds that nearly four out of five college students who enrolled in remedial courses had a high school grade point average of 3.0 or higher. Additionally, 95 percent said that

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they did “all or most” of the work that was asked of them in high school while nearly 80 percent thought that they were ready for college when they graduated from high school.

However, results from college admissions exams and other standardized tests support a different story. The report cites results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), noting that barely one quarter of high school seniors are proficient in math, almost half are not proficient in science, and more than one quarter lack even basic reading skills. Additionally, the report notes that only 43 percent of the high school juniors and seniors who took the ACT college entrance exam in 2007 met the mathematics benchmark of college readiness.

Given these dismal results, it is perhaps no surprise that nearly one in three of all college students (more than 1.3 million) must enroll in a remedial course after high school graduation. The report notes that this is a conservative number and does not include students attending private colleges and universities, nor does it account for students in regular-credit college courses that involve subject matter than should have been learned in high school.

Strong American Schools estimates the cost of remediation per student to be between \$1,607 and \$2,008 for public two-year institutions and between \$2,025 and \$2,531 for public four-year institutions. Using these estimates, it calculated an estimated \$2.31 to \$2.89 billion in total education costs, which includes tuition and fees and subsidies from state budgets and other sources. The estimate did not include lost tax revenue from poorly prepared students and costs for students in private colleges and universities.

In addition to their financial toll, remedial courses also decrease the likelihood that a student will ultimately graduate from college. According to the report, 57 percent of students from the high school class of 1992 who enrolled in college and took no remedial courses earned a bachelor’s degree within eight years. Of students who took one or two remedial courses, only 29 percent earned their degree.

The report offers several recommendations to ensure that more students are prepared for college. First, it encourages states, schools, and colleges to collect more data on remediation and particularly focus on the percentage of students who receive college remediation and the percentage of students who are prepared for university-level work. It also recommends that states improve high school standards and instruction and boost accountability, which includes a “smoother, more interconnected K–16 system” that shares common goals and definitions of success. Finally, it calls for university educators to do a better job with remediation, including more support for low-performing students.

“When American public schools do not ensure students receive a quality education, they fail in their mission and in their obligation to taxpayers,” Romer said. “Our country cannot afford a high school diploma that does not show real student achievement.”

The complete report is available at <http://www.edin08.com/diplomatonowhere.aspx>.

In Massachusetts, “Needs Improvement” Means More Testing to Ensure College Readiness

Last month, Massachusetts education officials announced that 80 percent of current tenth graders had passed the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) on their first try. Included in that total were approximately 20 percent of tenth graders who scored “needs improvement”—one rung above failing—in either math or English. Technically, those students passed the test, but under a new rule that took effect this year, they will have to complete additional courses in the subject area and take another state test before they can graduate from high school.

The Massachusetts Board of Education passed the rule two years ago in hopes that it would better prepare students for college or work by helping them gain a basic mastery of English and math. “What we don’t want is students and schools to think they can slide by on ‘needs improvement,’” **Mitchell Chester, Massachusetts Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education**, told the *Boston Globe*.

According to an article in the *Boston Globe*, the new rule was a “step toward” meeting the requirement in the No Child Left Behind Act that all students be proficient by 2014. “Initially, the board sought to require all students to score at least proficient in English and math this year—four years ahead of the federal deadline—but decided that would be too much of a leap for school districts, which have been struggling to boost achievement of all students, especially poor students or those with learning disabilities,” the article reads.

Chester said that the students who scored needs improvement would have to complete individualized proficiency plans that push them to work toward being proficient by the end of high school, but does not require them to be proficient in order to graduate. High schools will use the proficiency plans to outline students’ strengths and weaknesses on the MCAS and the courses they will have to complete by graduation. In addition, schools will test the students every year and measure their progress toward proficiency.

“New rule casts cloud on MCAS results” is available at http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2008/09/29/new_rule_casts_cloud_on_mcas_results/.



SAT, ACT, IB, AND AP: New Commission Report Studies Use of Standardized Tests in College Admission

Although college admission exams such as the ACT and SAT provide useful information to the college and universities that use them to make admission decisions, Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) exams may be more predictive of first-year and overall grades in college because they are more closely linked to high school curriculum. So says a new report from the Commission on the Use of Standardized Tests in Undergraduate Admission, which was created by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). The commission was charged with tackling the long-standing concerns regarding standardized tests, and the role of the ACT and SAT in determining who gains entry to the nation’s colleges and universities. The report was released on September 23 at NACAC’s annual conference.

“It’s electrifying to both sides of the desk,” **Louis L. Hirsh, admissions director at the University of Delaware**, told the *New York Times*. “To counselors who are worried about the stresses that the SAT places on the kids, and from the college end, the people whom all of us respect are looking at a test that all of us use and asking all of us to be more thoughtful about how they use it and what role it plays in our admissions.”

According to the report, standardized admission tests such as the SAT and ACT are not the most important factor in college admission decisions, but colleges and universities have “attributed increasing importance to standardized tests over the past decade.” In fact, a recent NACAC

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survey found that 62 percent of colleges attribute “considerable importance” to standardized tests in the admission decision, ranking it third behind high school grades in college prep classes (76 percent) and strength of curriculum (62 percent), but ahead of essays (28 percent), class rank (23 percent), counselor recommendations (21 percent), and other factors. Subject tests such as the AP and IB were given considerable importance by only 8 percent of colleges.

To a much greater extent than the ACT or SAT, the AP exams and Subject Tests administered by the College Board and the IB exams measure knowledge of subject matter covered in high school courses, the report finds. Additionally, it notes that there is very little expensive test preparation associated with them. Test prep for the ACT and SAT, however, can cost thousands of dollars and, as the report points out, often leads to an increase of only 20 to 30 points on the SAT scale.

The commission also chides *U.S. News and World Report* for using test scores as a measure of institutional quality. It adds that the use of admission test scores as college ranking criteria creates undue pressure on admission officers to pursue increasingly high test scores. As **William R. Fitzsimmons, the dean of admissions at Harvard University and chairman of the commission**, told the audience at the NACAC conference, “At Harvard we get terrific students, and we turn out terrific students later on. Is that due to Harvard or is that due to the students to begin with? Who knows? There are fabulous institutions with relatively low test-score averages that are absolutely first-rate, that take students from point A to point Z,” he said. “Educational quality has nothing to do, or very little to do, with actual average SAT scores.”

The report also cautions states against using standardized admission tests as evaluators of student achievement—particularly when high-stakes accountability measures are included—unless the tests are significantly modified. “Efforts to ensure that schools are preparing their students for college should not look to a single admission exam for an assessment of their progress, but to the strength of the school’s curriculum and students’ performance in those courses as their primary indicator,” the report reads.

One possible future for college admission tests that the commission includes in its report is the development of curriculum-based achievement tests that are designed in consultation with colleges, secondary schools, and state and federal agencies. According to the report, these tests have a number of attractive qualities. “Their use in college admission sends a message to students that studying their course material in high school, not taking extracurricular test prep courses that tend to focus on test-taking skills, is the way to do well on admission tests and succeed in a rigorous college curriculum,” it reads.

The complete report is available at

<http://www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/News/Press/testingcommissionreport.htm>.

“Study of Standardized Admissions Tests Is Big Draw at College Conference” is available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/29/education/29admissions.html>.

IN AND OUT: Study Examines What Happens to High School Dropouts Who Reenroll

Though 35 percent of students in an urban California district's Class of 2005 dropped out of school at least once over a five-year period, almost a third of the dropouts reenrolled, finds a new study by education research organization WestEd. However, over half of all reenrollees returned to school for just one year, and fewer than 20 percent ultimately earned a diploma.

The report, *Reenrollment of High School Dropouts in a Large, Urban School District*, examines the roughly four thousand students who enrolled as first-time freshmen in the San Bernardino City Unified School District during the 2001–02 school year, with a particular focus on those who left school and then returned. It found that four years later only 45 percent of the first-time freshmen in the Class of 2005 had been continuously enrolled and had graduated with a regular high school diploma; the report calls them “standard graduates.” (The 20 percent of students who were neither counted as dropouts nor graduates were considered “others”; included in this category were out-of-district transfers, students who were expelled, and those who earned alternative high school completion certificates.)

According to the report, more dropouts left in their first year of high school than any other year. However, the majority of these dropouts—60 percent—reenrolled in a San Bernardino high school at least once. The six reenrollees interviewed cited academic struggles, the need for additional help to master grade-level content, boredom, and “limited ways to make up failed courses and credits” as factors that led them to drop out. In addition, “life stresses” such as demanding jobs, parenting responsibilities, and violence in their communities overwhelmingly took a toll on the reenrollees. “Without exception, reenrollees reported mental health issues that impeded their ability to attend school regularly—anxiety, depression, and a ‘sense of hopelessness that can take you nowhere far,’” the report reads.

Ninth-grade and black dropouts were the most likely to reenroll, the report finds, while, conversely, male and English language learner students were especially likely to drop out and not reenroll. Almost half of all ninth-grade dropouts eventually returned to school, a percentage that dropped sharply with each successive grade. Researchers speculated that one reason for the decrease was that dropouts who returned to school at seventeen or eighteen were often sent to the district's adult education school rather than the district's standard high schools.

Reenrollment of High School Dropouts also details the results of interviews between researchers and San Bernardino district administrators and high school principals on their concerns related to reenrollment. They felt that reenrolling dropouts was “unquestionably the right thing to do, so we do it,” but admitted to feeling that there were disincentives to readmitting students. Key among these disincentives were the reduction in the state funding the district receives, as the money is connected to enrollment and attendance (and reenrollees tend to have poor attendance rates); the adverse effects on meeting accountability requirements (for example, because dropping out is counted as an event, a student who drops out and reenrolls more than once raises the dropout rate); and limited funding and staffing capacity to offer targeted credit recovery interventions.

“We need to make sure that ninth and tenth graders who fall off track make up those course credits quickly before they forever lose the chance to catch up,” said **BethAnn Berliner, lead author of WestEd's study**. “We also need options for older reenrollees who may need to balance job and family responsibilities as they try to make up the missing diploma requirements.”

To read the full report, which also details policy and practice recommendations made by San Bernardino district staff and students, go to http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/REL_2008056.pdf.

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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