



StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



SENATE COMMITTEE PASSES EDUCATION APPROPRIATIONS BILL

On July 30, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved a Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education appropriations bill that would provide \$63.5 billion in discretionary funding for the U.S. Department of Education. That total represents an increase of \$800 million compared to FY 2009, but is slightly lower than the \$64.2 billion that the House version of the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations would provide.

“This legislation is about looking to the future—a future where all kids have a chance for a good education and a chance to attend a safe and modern school, where all Americans have a chance for a chance to develop the skills to get a good job and where the most vulnerable Americans have access to the help they need,” said **Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), the chairman of the Senate Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee.**

[Like its counterpart in the House of Representatives](#), the Senate Appropriations Committee chose not to fund President Obama’s request to shift \$1.5 billion from Title I to fund a \$1 billion increase in the School Improvement Grants and provide \$500 million in Early Childhood Grants. However, unlike the House Appropriations Committee, which restored the entire \$1.5 billion to Title I, the Senate Appropriations Committee reserved \$700 million to repair and build new schools, something that Senator Harkin said would “create jobs and help kids learn.” As a result, the Senate bill would provide \$13.8 billion for Title I, compared to \$14.5 in the House version.

For the Striving Readers program, which focuses on improving the literacy skills of adolescent students who read below grade level, the Senate Appropriations Committee would provide \$262.9 million, an increase of \$227.5 million over FY 2009 and \$117 million more than the House version.¹ Similar to the House version, the Senate bill also includes \$50 million for a High School Graduation Initiative requested by the president.

The Senate bill would provide \$300 million for the Teacher Incentive Fund, which would go to states and school districts that want to reward effective teachers and schools for boosting student achievement. The committee considered an amendment by **Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA)**

¹ The bill reported out of the Senate Appropriations Committee would devote \$262.9 million to a revamped Striving Readers program, which would take a comprehensive approach to literacy, serve children from birth through grade 12, and subsume the mission of the Early Reading First program, which the bill eliminates. This funding level is an increase of \$115 million over the combined FY 2009 enacted level for Early Reading First and Striving Readers.

that would have boosted funding to \$400 million, but ultimately rejected it. The House version would provide \$446 million for the program.

For TRIO, the Senate would provide \$848 million. GEAR UP would receive \$313 million. Both of those totals are slightly less than the amount the House bill would provide. Statewide Data Systems would receive \$65 million in the Senate bill, which is the same amount that was included in the House bill and requested by the president in his budget.

To review proposed funding levels for education programs that benefit middle and high schools for FY 2009 and FY 2010, consult the chart at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/Fiscal10ProgramChart.pdf>.



UPSIDE DOWN: New Alliance Brief Says Federal Education Policy Needs to be Flipped

A new policy brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education argues that federal education policy needs to be flipped on its head if the nation is to graduate all students from high school, prepared for college and careers. According to the brief, *Reinventing the Federal Role in Education: Supporting the Goal of College and Career Readiness for All Students*, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is too lax where it should be firm and too rigid where it needs to be more flexible.

“Given the impending release of additional stimulus dollars intended to drive reform and the fast-moving common state standard development effort, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is needed sooner rather than later to ensure that reforms sought through stimulus dollars can be achieved and to ensure that federal law doesn’t undercut the standards effort,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Specifically, federal education policy should be firmer and tighter in establishing overall goals and ensuring that they are met while being more flexible and less prescriptive in determining how educators meet those goals.”

As the brief points out, having fifty different sets of standards and assessments leads to fifty different expectations about what students should know. Consequently, what students learn too often depends on where they live rather than on a common understanding of what they need to know to succeed in college, careers, and life. Instead, the brief argues that federal policy should establish college and career readiness as the goal for all students and support collaborative state-led efforts to define those expectations through common standards and assessments.

But that is not the only problem with NCLB, as identified by the brief. It notes that current law mandates how educators should address low-performing schools by requiring a specific sequence of one-size-fits-all interventions that are not informed by the problems unique to the individual schools. In the alternative envisioned by the Alliance, federal policy would permit state and local policymakers, administrators, and educators to make data-driven decisions about how to improve student achievement—provided that federal policy leaves the “what,” “when,” and “how” decisions to the educators who are closest to the students and schools, and then holds them accountable for the results.

As presented in the brief, NCLB's approach to high school reform is backwards. Where the nation needs commonality—expectations for students and the system, measures of college and career readiness, and definitions of vital indicators like graduation rates—there are fifty different standards. Similarly, where sharp instruments are needed to guide instructional and school improvement actions, there is a reliance on crude tools, like Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). And where individualization based on local circumstances is needed, such as interventions for low-performing schools, there is only uniformity mandated by federal policies.

Reinventing the Federal Role in Education makes several recommendations for how policymakers can improve upon NCLB as they begin the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Specifically, ESEA reauthorization should:

- Establish college and career readiness as the common goal for all students.
- Ensure meaningful accountability for high school outcomes designed around common indicators of college and career readiness and high school graduation.
- Replace the current, flawed, one-size-fits-all school improvement process with requirements for state- and district-led systems that are differentiated, data-driven, and prioritize addressing the lowest-performing high schools.
- Support strategies that are necessary to implement high school improvement at a much larger scale, including districtwide efforts, maximizing the role of external partners, and building the capacity of the system to implement innovative solutions that truly result in improved student outcomes.
- Provide new funding for the implementation of innovative solutions to address low-performing high schools.

[*Reinventing the Federal Role in Education*](#) is part of a series of briefs meant to inform policymakers about the shortcomings in NCLB as it relates to high school accountability and improvement, and encourage them to act quickly to fix the law.

Other briefs in the series are [*Moving Beyond AYP: High School Performance Indicators*](#), [*Whole-School Reform: Transforming the Nation's Low-Performing High Schools*](#), and [*Action Required: Addressing the Nation's Lowest-Performing High Schools*](#).



IMPLEMENTING GRADUATION COUNTS: Majority of States Are on Track to Report NGA Gradation Rate by 2011

Forty-five states will be ready to publicly report high school graduation rates by 2011 using a common graduation rate formula, according to a recent report from the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices. In 2005, governors of all fifty states signed the NGA Graduation Counts Compact to implement a common graduation rate formula, commit to building state data collections and reporting capacities, develop additional student outcome indicators, and report annual progress about graduation and dropout rates.

Implementing Graduation Counts: State Progress to Date, 2009 outlines state progress toward meeting the NGA Compact goals and the graduation requirements set forth under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). A 2008 regulation to NCLB from the U.S. Department of Education

mandated that all states implement a four-year adjusted graduation rate that can be disaggregated by grade level and demographic at the state, district, and high school levels by School Year (SY) 2010–2011. NCLB also requires that, following the SY 2011–2012, states use the rate to calculate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

Prior to the NGA Compact, states had plenty of leeway in how they tracked students over time and calculated graduation rates. Rather than use a common calculation that would allow for comparisons across state lines, states used a variety of unsophisticated reporting methods that frequently resulted in inconsistent and deceptive high school completion data. (Read more about prior misleading graduation rates in the Alliance’s [Every Student Counts](#) policy brief.)

“To develop effective strategies for improving student outcomes, states need an accurate measure of how many students graduate,” said **John Thomasian, director of the NGA Center**. “Governors recognize that a common, more reliable formula for calculating high school graduation rates is essential to ensuring that all students graduate from high school ready for college and work.”

According to the report, twenty states currently calculate and report a graduation rate consistent with the NGA Compact and another five states plan to do so by the end of the year. By 2010, eight more states will use the Compact formula and, by the end of 2011, another twelve states are expected to do so. Only three states (Hawaii, Idaho, and Illinois) have not yet indicated a date by which they will meet the NGA commitment, but the report presumes they will meet the federal NCLB deadline by 2011. Kentucky and Wisconsin have requested an extension from the U.S. Department of Education and plan to report sometime after 2011.

The NGA Compact formula calculates the graduation rate by dividing the number of on-time graduates in any given year by the number of first-time entering ninth graders four years earlier. According to the Compact, “graduates” are defined as students receiving a high school diploma; the number of first-time entering ninth graders can be adjusted to account for student transfers, special education students, and recent immigrants with limited English proficiency.

Implementing Graduation Counts also takes a look at which states are reporting “additional student indicators” such as completion rates for students earning alternative degrees, in-grade retention rates, and college-readiness rates. Of the twenty states already reporting graduation rates using the Compact formula, the report finds that eighteen of them are reporting additional factors and the remaining two are in the process of developing systems to report these indicators.

Beyond establishing a consistent formula for determining graduation rates, the report maintains that “it is critical that states provide guidance and training to school and district personnel who collect and enter student information,” adding that state leaders should enact and enforce state policies that promote accurate data collection and analyses. Acknowledging that current fiscal conditions could impose restrictions, the report points out that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act contains \$245 million for the specific purpose of developing state data systems.

Read the complete report at <http://tinyurl.com/mqbyxy>.

Los Angeles Unified School District Reports Large Decrease in Dropout Rate

The dropout rate for the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) fell from 31.7 percent in School Year (SY) 2006–07 to 26.4 percent in SY 2007–08 and represented one of the largest improvements in the state, according to a recent article in the *Los Angeles Times*.

The article was careful to point out that the dropout rate was an approximation. “The dropout rate is a four-year estimate based on two years of data that, for the first time, tracks individual students,” the article reads. “But it can’t tabulate dropouts who are listed as having left a California public school for another school. The graduation rate uses four years of data, but does not yet track individuals.”

In a separate article, the *Los Angeles Daily News* points out that the state will not be able to accurately track whether ninth-graders graduate after four years until next year. “District student data that tracks individual students for a full four years reveals that many schools continue to fall closer to the 50 percent margin of graduation that state data reveals,” said **Maria Brenes, a lead organizer at Inner City Struggle, an organization focused on reforming low-performing urban schools**. Independent estimates, such as one done by **Chris Swanson of the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center**, [peg LAUSD’s graduation rate at 47.7 percent](#).

School officials partly credit the district’s dropout prevention unit, a program focused on finding and re-enrolling dropouts, and identifying at-risk students and providing them with additional support. Administrators also cite the benefit of converting large high schools into clusters of smaller academies, increasing teacher support, and instituting a mandatory study hall.

The *Los Angeles Daily News* also reports that California has made significant progress in tracking student achievement and now uses a Statewide Student Identifiers system. “Since May, the state allowed schools to change their data by allowing counselors and administrators to find students on their drop-out lists and verify their status or in some cases re-enroll them into school,” the article reads. It notes that the data system helped school officials discover 16,000 students who were counted twice and about 20,000 students who had been inaccurately counted as dropouts.

Both articles spotlight several high schools that saw dramatic increases in their dropout rates. Particularly notable were Birmingham High School, which saw its dropout rate fall by 51 percent from 2007 to 2008 and Reseda High School, which saw its rate decline by 42 percent.

Read the complete [Los Angeles Times](#) and [Los Angeles Daily News](#) articles.



GRADUATING AMERICA: New Report Examines the Opportunity for High School Reform at the Local, State, and Federal Level

A new report from Jobs for the Future and The Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University takes a look at seventeen states described as the “make or break” places to reaching President Obama’s goal of making America first in educational attainment. According to the report, [Graduating America: Meeting the Challenge of Low Graduation-Rate High Schools](#), these seventeen states produce approximately 70 percent of the nation’s high school dropouts and, although they struggle with a common challenge, these states are vastly different in their racial makeup, population, and educational reform progress.

The report identifies the characteristics of schools, districts, and states that make certain high school reform strategies more likely to succeed in certain places. It calls for policymakers, school administrators, and other education stakeholders to solve the nation’s dropout crisis by carefully matching reform efforts to a school’s unique circumstances. For example, patterns of geographic

spread and concentration, state, district, and school characteristics, and socioeconomic, demographic, and political trends in a community can all impact efforts at reform.

In examining the distribution and concentration of low graduation-rate high schools within a state, the report finds three patterns. The first is the “big city challenge” which occurs when there is an “intense concentration of low graduation-rate high schools in one or two metropolitan school districts.” The report recommends that states experiencing this dilemma (Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee) should charge **local** officials with taking a leading role in solving the problem.

Another geographical pattern is a “statewide spread” of low graduation-rate high schools. Alabama, Arizona, California, Michigan, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas fall into this category. Because the number of low-performing schools is relatively low and spread throughout the state, the report argues that these states have the best chance at making meaningful progress. It is recommended that **state** officials take the lead in tackling the dropout problem in these states.

The third pattern is a “statewide crisis,” in which a state has “high concentrations of high schools with low graduation rates that are widespread across the state.” States in this category have some of the nation’s lowest overall graduation rates and include Florida, Georgia, Nevada, New Mexico, and South Carolina. Due to the pervasiveness of the problem and the fact that most of these states are currently experiencing budget problems, the report calls for a larger **federal** role. (Read more about Georgia’s struggle with low graduation rates in a recent [Atlanta Journal-Constitution story](#)).

Graduating America also analyses district, school, and student characteristics such as school size, student to teacher ratios, the percentage of students living in poverty, and the percentage of minority students. Additionally, it examines factors such as economic conditions, population growth, the rate at which a community is becoming multicultural, and the overall community commitment to improving education and advancing opportunity for young people. For example, the report finds eleven of the seventeen “make or break” states were among the top fifteen states with the nation’s highest unemployment rates in 2008–09.

“The go-it-alone approach of leaving it to failing schools to fix themselves has not worked,” said **Robert Balfanz, report coauthor and codirector of The Everyone Graduates Center**. “With the federal government ready to invest billions of dollars into turning around low-performing schools, the time is right to form the federal-state-local and community partnerships needed to transform or replace the low graduation-rate high schools that drive the nation’s dropout crisis.”

The report makes several recommendations for action at the federal level:

- Require states seeking American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of “Race to the Top” funding to use analytic data on graduation rates and low graduation-rate high schools as part of their plans for turning around failing schools.
- Build the capacity of states, districts, and schools to implement appropriate high school reform strategies.

- Designate additional federal innovation funding for the development and replication of effective school designs to use in transforming or replacing low graduation-rate high schools.
- Target federal financing to high schools, districts, and states with the most pressing dropout problems.

“To successfully transform or replace low graduation-rate high schools, states and districts need access to the growing base of what works and where it works,” said **Adria Steinberg, a vice president at Jobs for the Future and coauthor of the report**. “It would be a waste of precious resources to quickly scale up interventions that were successful in one place without carefully analyzing the conditions that make success possible, and understanding which interventions work under what circumstances.”

2009 KIDS COUNT Data Book Now Available

On July 28, the Annie E. Casey Foundation released the twentieth annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, which profiles the well-being of America’s children on a state-by-state basis and ranks states on ten measures of well-being.

In the companion essay to this year’s *Data Book*, the foundation calls on federal leaders, state and local decisionmakers, and children’s advocates to transform how they use data to improve the lives of vulnerable children. Specifically, it calls for leadership at the federal level to develop high-quality data systems; a commitment at the state and local levels to improve performance measurement; and engagement of children’s advocates and other concerned leaders.

The 2009 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* is available at <http://www.aecf.org/>.



A Summer Postcard from the Alliance for Excellent Education

Dear *Straight A's* Reader,

With schools around the country out for summer and Congress in its August recess, the Alliance newsletter—although not the Alliance staff—will be taking a brief summer vacation during the rest of August.

The next issue of *Straight A's* will be dated September 14. In the meantime, please visit the Alliance website, <http://www.all4ed.org>, for the latest education news and events.

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.