



# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## CONGRESS BEGINS BUDGET DEBATE: House and Senate Budget Plans Accommodate President Obama's Education Proposals

Earlier this year, President Obama released a budget outline for fiscal year (FY) 2010 that contained few actual numbers but proposed new investments in education, including an expansion of early childhood education, a focus on rigorous standards and assessments that are aligned to the demands of the global economy, efforts to better prepare and reward effective teachers and principals, and more opportunities for students to go to college and graduate. (Additional details on the president's budget are expected later this month.)

"I've emphasized repeatedly what I expect out of this budget," Obama said at a [March 24 news conference](#), citing health care reform, clean-energy initiatives, a reduction in the deficit, and an "[investment] in education, K-12 and beyond, to upgrade the skills of the American worker so that we can compete in the international economy."

Judging by the separate budget plans they passed last week, the House and Senate basically supported Obama's priorities, including his education proposals. As **House Budget Committee Chairman John Spratt (D-SC)** explained, the House's budget resolution supports the president's proposals for "further investments in educating Americans," and accommodates Obama's plan to expand access to college and ensure that all children learn and achieve in elementary and secondary school.

"President Bush has left President Obama a hard hand to play: an economy in crisis and a budget in deep deficit—in deficit this year alone by \$1.752 trillion," said Spratt. "President Obama has responded with a budget that meets the challenge head-on. Our budget reflects his major priorities [and] ... puts the budget back on a fiscally sustainable path while advancing key priorities in health care, energy, and education."

According to [the Senate Budget Committee](#), the Senate's budget resolution "will lay the foundation for our nation's long-term economic security," specifically mentioning a reduction in dependence on foreign energy, excellence in education, and health care reform. "The budget resolution responds with investments in education that will generate economic growth and jobs, prepare our workforce to compete, make college more affordable, and hopefully improve student achievement," said **Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D-SD)**.

Republicans countered by saying that the Democrats' plan failed to make tough choices and instead put all of the sacrifices on future generations. "The Democrats' budget spends too much, taxes too much, and borrows too much," said **House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH)**.

“Short-term, it will hurt the economy and destroy jobs. Long-term, the consequences will be even more grave for our children and grandchildren—tripling our debt to unsustainable levels.”

Congress will begin negotiating the differences between the House and Senate budget resolutions when it returns from Easter recess during the week of April 20. One of the key differences that will need to be resolved is the amount of nondefense discretionary spending the budget resolution will permit. President Obama’s budget commits \$539.7 billion for nondefense discretionary programs, which includes everything from education and health care to transportation and NASA, but it does not include mandatory programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. The House plan would reduce nondefense discretionary spending by \$7.1 billion compared to the president’s plan, while the Senate plan would reduce it by about \$15 billion compared to the president’s budget.<sup>1</sup>

After the differences are ironed out, Congress will pass a Congressional Budget Resolution, which is a nonbinding spending blueprint that is not signed by the president but does set 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. In total, the House plan would provide the Appropriations Committee with \$1.089 trillion in discretionary spending, which is about \$7 billion less than the president’s budget request and \$8 billion more than the Senate plan.

### **Duncan Proposes No Changes to Recent High School Graduation Rate Regulations**

In October 2008, the U.S. Department of Education released new federal regulations and guidance on Title I that changed the No Child Left Behind Act’s requirements related to high school graduation rate data collection, calculation, and accountability. The regulations adopted much of the consensus that had formed to that point around graduation rates and adopted some core components of the policy solutions laid out in the legislation introduced in the 110th Congress.

In the weeks since the regulations were announced, many in the education community were watching **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** to see whether he would make any changes to these regulations. In an [April 1 letter to chief state school officers](#), Duncan announced no changes to the graduation rate regulations, saying that he supports them and believes that they “strike the right balance between accountability and flexibility, thereby encouraging schools to serve all student populations.”

“It is increasingly clear that a high school diploma is the minimum credential needed for success in the labor force,” Duncan wrote. “High schools and districts with low graduation rates must be held accountable for their failures and must take action to improve these rates. The new regulations related to graduation rates are an important first step.”

[Every Student Counts: The Role of Federal Policy in Improving Graduation Rate Accountability](#), a recent issue brief by the Alliance for Excellent Education, examines the graduation rate regulations further. The Alliance also issued [individual state briefs](#) that outline a state’s current high school graduation policies and describe how recent regulations from the U.S. Department of Education could impact these policies.

Duncan’s letter did indicate some small changes to the approval process for states’ graduation rate proposals and said that more information on those changes will be forthcoming in the near future. The letter also included some changes to the Title I regulations that do not pertain to graduation rates, including a repeal of the ban that had forbidden underperforming school districts to serve as tutoring providers and an easing of the fourteen-day notification requirement on public school choice.

<sup>1</sup> The House and Senate plans assume exactly the same level of discretionary funding for defense as the president’s budget proposal (\$556.1 billion in 2010, not including \$130 billion in funding for Iraq and Afghanistan).



## **SHORT SIGHTED: New Alliance Report Calls on United States to be a More Active Participant in International Benchmarking**

While other developed nations benefit by regularly comparing, or “benchmarking,” their educational performance and practices against each other, the United States largely ignores the world’s useful lessons in improving education, according to a new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education. The report provides recommendations to the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Congress for immediately increasing participation in international comparisons that could boost student performance.

“U.S. Olympic teams don’t ignore the gains made by their competitors;” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**, “nor can the United States ignore international education gains. In a world where our nation’s ability to continue winning the global economic competition is so closely tied to the educational preparation of our citizens, the United States cannot afford to bury its head in the sand and ignore the innovations in education that occur outside of its borders.”

*Short Sighted: How America’s Lack of Attention to International Education Studies Impedes Improvement* notes that overall U.S. student performance on international comparisons is poor and continues to decline, emphasizing the urgency for the United States to examine what it could learn from other countries. For example, in the 1960s, the United States produced the highest high school completion rates among all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member nations, but by 2005, it slipped to twenty-first among the twenty-seven OECD countries with available data. And in college graduation rates, America has fallen from second to fifteenth since 1995.

The report finds similar failings in math and science. In 2003, American fifteen-year-olds ranked nineteenth out of twenty-nine OECD member nations in science. On the most recent test, in 2006, Americans dropped to twenty-first. A similar trend is evident in mathematics, where fifteen-year-olds in the United States ranked twenty-third in 2003 but slipped to twenty-fifth out of thirty OECD member nations by 2006.

“The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), created by the world’s thirty most-developed countries, is a respected tool for policymakers at all levels to learn from the highest-performing nations,” Wise continued. “But even individuals who disagree with the results on PISA tests should agree that the United States’ failure to take full advantage of PISA’s many lessons is a lost opportunity to learn from the highest-performing nations about how to improve student performance.”

As the report points out, the United States is the only OECD nation with a federal education system whose individual states still do not participate in PISA. In addition, it says that U.S. officials have “consistently declined invitations to participate in all but one of the OECD’s studies on educational policies and practices.” The report highlights several OECD studies in which the United States did not participate, including an international report designed to help policymakers formulate and implement school leadership policies to improve teaching and learning, and an international survey of teachers and school principals that includes questions on

how good teaching is recognized and rewarded and strategies to provide teachers with effective professional development.

The brief offers six recommendations for how the U.S. Department of Education (ED) can boost the nation's involvement in international benchmarking and increase the visibility of American students' performance. Specifically, it recommends that ED should:

- immediately undertake a comprehensive analysis that (a) reviews its current policies and participation in international comparisons, (b) lists the ongoing international educational studies that have numerous nations' involvement, (c) evaluates the possible benefits of participating for each study, and (d) prepares recommendations for Secretary Arne Duncan about what changes should be made;
- immediately create an advisory group that reviews current participation in international comparisons and submit recommendations to Secretary Duncan and the Institute for Education Sciences about future participation;
- commit to full U.S. participation in all major international benchmarking opportunities, including the OECD's future education studies;
- consult with the OECD, the National Governors Association, and the Council of Chief State School Officers on how best to provide opportunities for states to participate in future OECD studies;
- work with the OECD to ensure that administrative errors do not compromise the release of future PISA results; and
- consult with organizations in fields such as education and business to create an ongoing public awareness and interest in the importance of international education comparisons.

The brief also envisions a larger role for the U.S. Congress in the international benchmarking process and the performance of American students and offers two recommendations. First, it calls on Congress to appropriate the money necessary to participate fully in the PISA benchmarking and evaluation process. Second, it says that Congress should conduct periodic oversight hearings regarding the nation's international education performance, efforts underway to learn from other nations' successes, and actual application of international practices that could benefit education in the United States.

In a [statement on the report's release](#), Wise was careful to draw a distinction between the policies of the Bush Administration, which frequently cited budgetary reasons as justification for not participating in surveys and studies beyond the basic PISA, and the Obama Administration, which has expressed support for "college- and career-ready, internationally benchmarked standards," according to a [February 9 speech](#) by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

"The American public has been largely left in the dark about lackluster American performance on PISA and other international comparisons over the last few years," Wise said. "Now that President Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have called for higher educational standards that reflect international demands, there is a wonderful opportunity to shine a spotlight on this issue and bring it to the forefront of the educational debate."

*Short Sighted: How America's Lack of Attention to International Education Studies Impedes Improvement* is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/shortsighted.pdf>.



**“NEITHER REST NOR TRANQUILITY”: Former Senior Advisor to British Prime Minister Says School Reform in the United States is at a “Critical Juncture;” Decisions Today Will Impact America’s Capacity to Succeed in the Future**

School reform in the United States is at a critical juncture and, over the next year or so, it will be necessary to choose between two broad options: a retreat to the comfortable, introverted, input-focused, evidence-light approach that characterized education reform in the last three decades of the twentieth century; or an advance to the demanding, outward-looking, results-focused, evidence-informed approach toward which some progress has recently been made. That is the argument laid out in “Neither Rest Nor Tranquility: Education and the American Dream in the 21st Century,” by **Sir Michael Barber, who leads McKinsey and Company’s Global Education in Practice and served as a senior advisor to British Prime Minister Tony Blair from 1997 through 2005.**<sup>2</sup>

“Both future economic success and the wide aspirations at the heart of the very idea of America depend on vastly improving the outcomes of public education,” he writes. “The great threat to the country’s future is that for a range of reasons it might fail to rise to this challenge.”

Before looking to the future, Sir Michael looks back to the 1950s, a time when the American high school “reached its zenith—at least for white kids.” Up until that time—and even beyond—he argues that the United States had a “huge comparative advantage over all other countries in the provision of universal, general education.” He credits this advantage to the existence of universally available high school education and the growing availability of college. “Because good schooling brings long-run benefits, America’s educational leadership over the rest of the world brought substantial relative gains in economic growth right through to the end of the 20th century,” he writes.

But, Sir Michael argues, over the last quarter of the twentieth century, the United States lost that advantage as educational attainment—in both high school and beyond—stagnated while countries that had previously trailed the United States began to catch up. “This relative slide in the educational performance of the United States has had, and will continue to have, economic consequences,” he writes, adding that the nation’s “relative weakness in education puts at risk long-term growth rates.”

Addressing critics who suggest that the recent failings of American students on international tests does not matter given the nation’s strong economic growth over the last two decades, Sir Michael notes that the “time lag in the relationship between schooling and economic growth is long,” adding, “This is a dangerously complacent line to take.”

Sir Michael also comments on what he sees as a “worrying lack of anxiety” among Americans about the state of public education. “It seems that the public is resigned to the state of its public schools rather than satisfied or delighted with them,” he writes. “There is little recognition that unless public education significantly improves in the near future, there is a disaster in the

---

<sup>2</sup> Sir Michael Barber’s essay, published by WestEd, was adapted from a keynote presentation that he presented at Aspen Institute’s National Education Summit on September 15, 2008.

making. Education systems don't fail with the suddenness of a natural disaster but the consequences can be just as devastating.”

If the American public, in general, does not seem overly worried about its public schools, Sir Michael takes heart in the fact that there is a “growing recognition” among the nation’s leaders at all levels that public education needs fixing. He credits the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the clear data it provides for helping to reveal the extent of the problem. “The diagnosis is becoming clearer and, while this doesn’t automatically lead to the cure, it is a major step forward,” he writes.

Additionally, because of the work of pioneering schools, cities, nonprofits, and foundations, Sir Michael believes that “never before has there been so much insight into how to bring about successful change, nor such substantial capacity to deliver it.” However, the challenge remains as to whether political and educational leaders can seize this insight and capacity and bring irreversible progress.

Turning to the future, Sir Michael looks at NCLB and offers recommendations on how it could be refined, adding, “The question is not ‘Should it be reversed or abandoned?’ but ‘How can it be refined and followed through?’”

One suggestion he offers deals with ensuring the quality of better assessments. “The power of NCLB depends crucially on the quality of the assessments used,” he writes. “Where poor tests are used, the information they provide will be misleading with potentially dire consequences for the students themselves when they leave school and enter the real world.” He suggests asking the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to create a rigorous test to be given free to states.

Sir Michael also stresses the importance of ensuring highly effective teachers and principals, especially the schools facing the toughest challenges. He notes that the world’s best education systems are recruiting teachers who have both the right personal qualities and come from the top third of college graduate distribution, compared to the bottom third in the United States. He acknowledges that providing every child with a highly effective teacher will require a “root-and-branch” reform of the traditional bureaucratic system of recruiting and training teachers and a rethinking of the way the nation pays and rewards them.

Other recommendations that Sir Michael offers are integrating growth models with a continuing focus on absolute outcomes, ensuring policy is implemented consistently and effectively, helping districts and states develop the capacity to act decisively in response to data, and improving the distribution of public school funding.

He also calls for “common or national—as distinct from federal” standards and says that the emerging bipartisan alliance in favor of such standards indicates a growing recognition that the United States needs its standards to be fewer, clearer, and higher. “Across the world, standards in mathematics, science, and English will inevitably be set by global benchmarks in a globalized economy,” he writes. “Quite simply, to succeed, countries will need world-class standards; algebra and geometry don’t change at the Rio Grande or the 49th parallel.”

Sir Michael argues that whether the United States can rise to the challenge of educational transformation that will shape its capacity to succeed in the coming decades but will also impact the rest of the world. “Counting on America’s success in this endeavor are not just children and families across this great country, not just the future of the American economy, not just the idea of the American Dream, but all of us around the world,” he writes.

The complete essay is available at [http://www.wested.org/online\\_pubs/pp-09-02.pdf](http://www.wested.org/online_pubs/pp-09-02.pdf).

### **Virginia’s Use of Individual Student Identifier Leads to More Reliable Dropout Data**

Of the 96,152 students who began high school in Virginia in 2004 and were scheduled to graduate in the spring of 2008, 8,347, or 8.7 percent, dropped out before earning their high school diploma, according to the latest statistics from the Virginia Department of Education, compared to approximately 82 percent of students who graduated on time.

Because it assigns an individual student identifier, Virginia was able to track students throughout their high school career. “The publication of these cohort reports represents a milestone in the commonwealth’s effort to account for every student,” said **Superintendent of Public Instruction Patricia I. Wright**. “This is vital information that will shape efforts at the state and local levels to keep students in school and on track toward earning a diploma.”

After analyzing the data, Virginia officials discovered that students who repeated grades, attended multiple schools, and who were frequently absent were more likely to drop out. For example, 58.8 percent of the students who dropped out repeated at least one grade during high school and 37.4 percent repeated their ninth-grade year. Additionally, 29.4 percent of the dropouts had attendance rates of less than 80 percent during the year before they dropped out, compared to only 2.1 percent who earned their diplomas.

The data also helped officials determine when students were likely to drop out. According to the press release, 55 percent of the students who dropped out did so before the eleventh grade, with 26.9 dropping out during ninth grade and 28 percent doing so in tenth grade. A little more than 20 percent of students dropped out in twelfth grade.

“Using the data from these cohort reports, educators and policymakers can now see where interventions are most urgently needed and identify high schools and school divisions that have developed best practices and strategies that others can emulate and adapt,” said **Virginia Board of Education President Mark E. Emblidge**.

The press release and links to school- and state-level data are available at <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/NewHome/pressreleases/2009/mar31.html>.

***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.