



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



BUDGET TALKS UNDERWAY IN CONGRESS: Plan Under Consideration Likely to Provoke Confrontation with President Obama Over Domestic Spending Priorities, Including Education

With Republicans now in control of the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, the U.S. Congress is poised to pass a congressional budget resolution that increases defense spending, but maintains tight spending limits on non-defense programs, including education, and will almost certainly lead to a confrontation later in the year with President Obama on spending priorities.

“By passing a balanced budget that emphasizes growth, common sense, and the needs of the middle class, Republicans have shown that the Senate is under new management and delivering on the change and responsible government the American people expect,” [said Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell \(R-KY\)](#).

Although it is nonbinding, the congressional budget resolution is an important step in the budget process because it sets monetary limits for the spending and tax legislation that Congress will consider for the rest of the year. It also provides guidance to the appropriations committees on how to divide resources among various federal departments and agencies, thus setting the stage for the twelve annual appropriations bills that must be passed by Congress and signed by the president, including the one that funds the U.S. Department of Education.

This year’s debate on the budget resolution was especially interesting because it started to reveal splits among Republican members who want to increase spending on defense but are limited by the very restrictive spending caps set by the Budget Control Act of 2011, also known as the sequester. Democrats would also like to see the caps increased so the federal government can provide more money for education, health care, and other domestic priorities.

Although the respective budget resolutions passed by the House and Senate technically stick to the spending limits of \$523 billion for defense and \$493.5 billion for non-defense programs that were set by the Budget Control Act, they employ an accounting maneuver to increase defense spending to \$619 billion. The tactic was necessary to gain enough Republican support to pass the resolution as no Democrats supported it.

“Instead of being honest and upfront about their goals, the Republicans have used a number of budgetary gimmicks to cover-up the devastating impact that their budget will have on the lives of ordinary Americans,” [said Senator Bernie Sanders \(I-VT\), top Democrat on the Senate Budget Committee](#). “I find it particularly offensive that Republicans, who are demanding

massive cuts in Medicaid, education, nutrition, and health care in order to move toward a balanced budget, have no problem adding \$38 billion to the deficit through the ... Overseas Contingency Operations fund, [which falls outside of the budgetary caps]. That is hypocrisy pure and simple.”

Before passing its version of the budget resolution, the Senate considered forty-nine amendments and approved thirty-five. A largely symbolic amendment by **Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA)** encourages Congress to replace the spending limits on defense and non-defense spending. It passed 50–48 and received support from six Republicans: **Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN), Kelly Ayotte (R-NH), Susan Collins (R-ME), Bob Corker (R-TN), Lindsey Graham (R-SC), and John McCain (R-AZ).**

The Senate also passed an amendment by **Senator David Vitter (R-LA)** that prohibits the federal government from “mandating, incentivizing, or coercing” states to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or other curricula or assessments. The amendment passed by a 54–46 party-line vote. **Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), top Democrat on the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee,** said the amendment was not necessary because federal law “already prohibits the federal government from requiring states to adopt certain standards or curriculum.” She added that neither Race to the Top nor the No Child Left Behind waivers required states to adopt the CCSS.

Both the accounting maneuver that increased defense spending and the Kaine amendment are evidence that Congress is growing weary of the tight spending limits set by the Budget Control Act and could have difficulty passing appropriations bills later this year unless it is willing to negotiate the spending limits.

During debate on the resolution, **Senate Budget Committee Chairman Mike Enzi (R-WY)** hinted that Republicans would be willing to take another look at the spending caps. Such action could lead to negotiations with President Obama around a broader budget deal that could raise spending caps and lead to increased funding for defense and domestic programs alike.

In the interim, representatives from the House and Senate are expected to negotiate a final version of the budget resolution when Congress returns from its two-week recess on April 13.



UPDATE ON STUDENT SUCCESS ACT: Vote on ESEA Rewrite Possible in Mid-April, According to House Education Committee Chairman

Speaking at the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) annual legislative conference on March 24, **House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN)** said he hoped that the U.S. House of Representatives would vote on legislation to rewrite the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) when Congress returns from its two-week recess on April 13.

The bill, known as the Student Success Act, was expected to pass the House on February 27, but it was pulled from consideration after conservative members began to waver in their support.

As reported by [Education Week](#), Kline thought the bill would “sail through” on February 27 but was caught off guard by “a little blog from somebody who had a lot of misinformation.” Most notably, the blog incorrectly said that the Student Success Act would force states to keep the Common Core State Standards. Instead the bill “[prevents] the Secretary of Education from coercing states into adopting Common Core or any other common standards or assessments, as well as reining in the secretary’s regulatory authority,” according to a [fact sheet from the House Committee on Education and the Workforce](#).

“The entire leadership team was diverted from a really excellent piece of legislation,” Kline said. “We simply stopped where we were in considering the [bill]. All the debate was complete. So now it’s sitting there.”

Kline told the [Washington Post](#) in an interview after his speech that he is still a “handful” of votes short to pass the bill. In addition to the blogger, the bill faces opposition from the Club for Growth and Heritage Foundation, two conservative organizations that want a complete retreat from a federal role in education and do not think the bill goes far enough toward that goal. Kline cannot afford to lose very many Republican votes because no Democrats are expected to support the Student Success Act.

“No bill is better than a bad bill,” **Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA), top Democrat on the Education and the Workforce Committee**, told the audience at CCSSO, as reported by the *Washington Post*. Scott [previously charged](#) that the Student Success Act “abandons the fundamental principles of equity and accountability in our education system” and “would take American public education back decades.”

In the U.S. Senate, Republican and Democratic staff are continuing bipartisan negotiations and still expect to mark up a bill in the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee during the week of April 13th.



“A VITAL STEP”: High School Graduation Rate Gaps Between White Students and Students of Color Narrow Slightly, According to New Data

Black and Hispanic students have long graduated from high school at lower rates than their white peers, but new data from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) released on March 16 shows that the gaps are beginning to narrow, if only slightly. From School Year (SY) 2010–11 to SY 2012–13, the gap between white and black students’ graduation rates decreased from 17 percentage points to 15.9 percentage points. The graduation rate gap between white and Hispanic students decreased from 13 percentage points to 11.4 percentage points during the same time period.

“The hard work of America’s educators, families, communities, and students is paying off,” said **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan**. “This is a vital step toward readiness for success in college and careers for every student in this country. While these gains are promising, we know that we have a long way to go in improving educational opportunities for every student—no matter their zip code—for the sake of our young people and our nation’s economic strength.”

As shown in the table below, high school graduation rates for American Indian, black, Hispanic, low-income, and limited English proficiency students all increased at a rate higher than that for white students. With a 4.7 percentage-point increase from SY 2010–11 to SY 2012–13, American Indian students saw the largest increase in graduation rates, followed by Hispanic students with a 4.2 percentage-point increase. The only group to see its graduation rate increase at a rate slower than that of white students was Asian/Pacific Islander students, who already had a graduation rate higher than white students.

Two-Year Change in High School Graduation Rates

	2010–11	2011–12	2012–13	Two-Year Increase (Percentage Points)
American Indian	65%	67%	69.7%	4.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	87%	88%	88.7%	1.7
Black	67%	69%	70.7%	3.7
Hispanic	71%	73%	75.2%	4.2
White	84%	86%	86.6%	2.6
Low-Income	70%	72%	73.3%	3.3
Limited English Proficiency	57%	59%	61.1%	4.1
Students with Disabilities	59%	61%	61.9%	2.9
All Students	79%	80%	81.4%	2.4

Earlier this year, ED announced that the [national high school graduation rate for the Class of 2013 was 81 percent](#)—the highest ever recorded. The rate is up from 80 percent for the Class of 2012 and 79 percent for the Class of 2011.

The data released on March 16 also includes a state-by-state breakdown for each of the eight student subgroups listed in the table above. Access all of the subgroup graduation rate data at <http://1.usa.gov/1MldPnj>.



UNEQUAL RECOVERY: Two New Publications Examine Economic Challenges Facing the Black Community Post-Great Recession

The latest monthly jobs report from the U.S. Department of Labor is due this Friday and is likely to show a national unemployment rate that continues to recover from the depths of the so-called “Great Recession,” which plagued the United States from December 2007 until June 2009, according to the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research, which serves as the official arbiter of recessions in the United States.

Based on the most recent available data, the national unemployment rate was 5.5 percent in February, down from 9.9 percent at the height of the recession. Even with the recovery well underway, two new publications show that its effects have not been equally felt in the black community.

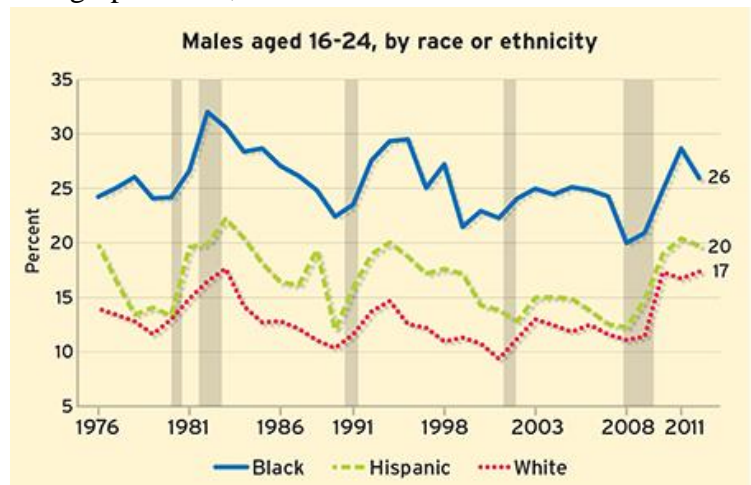
“[Black Men and the Struggle for Work](#),” published in the Spring 2015 issue of *Education Next*, discusses the educational, economic, and environmental challenges facing blacks—especially

black males—and then examines the difficulties that they have traditionally faced in the job market.

The article notes that inner-city black children are “less likely to be enrolled in a high-quality child-care arrangement ... clustered in failing [primary] schools ... more likely to be suspended or enrolled in special education classes, less likely to graduate from high school on time, and, indeed, more likely to drop out of school altogether.”

The article focuses on young black males, aged sixteen to twenty-four, individuals who are much more likely to be unemployed and disconnected from schools and other training than their white and Hispanic counterparts, as shown in the graph below, which is taken from the article.

“By 2011, after the end of the last recession, more than one-quarter of young black males were neither employed nor enrolled in school or vocational educational training,” the article notes. “The rates for white and Hispanic young people were also very high, around 20 percent, but throughout most of the past few decades rates of disconnection among black youth have been higher than for the other two groups.”



The article says that confronting poverty and inequality in the inner city requires an “effective, sustained, and coordinated mission of government-funded institutions to support opportunities for economic self-sufficiency among the poor.” It credits the Obama administration for creating “ladders of opportunity” for youth of color through Promise Neighborhoods, Promise Zones, and other initiatives to “enhance family and community ties and better embed households in networks of institutional supports to improve the in-school and extracurricular experiences of school-age children.” However, it notes that these strategies are, at best, multisite demonstration programs that only meet a fraction of the need. “Congress has seriously hampered the replication and expansion of these programs by refusing the administration’s repeated requests for additional funds,” the article notes.

A second publication—a new issue brief from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI)—delves deeper into the job picture and shows that while unemployment rates for whites and Hispanics are approaching their pre-recession lows, unemployment rates for blacks remain significantly higher five years into recovery from the Great Recession. In fact, among the more than thirty states included in the report, unemployment rates for blacks have returned to pre-Great Recession levels in only two states—Connecticut and South Carolina.

“The unemployment rate for black communities is at a crisis level, even as the economy gets closer and closer to a full recovery,” said **report author and EPI economist Valerie Wilson**. “Even before the Great Recession, black unemployment has consistently been twice as high as

white unemployment. To address this problem, we need to look beyond simply returning to the pre-recession status quo and implement policies aimed at ensuring that everyone who is willing and able to work has a job.”

According to the report, [*Projected Decline in Unemployment in 2015 Won't Lift Blacks Out of the Recession-Carved Crater*](#), unemployment rates for whites (4.5 percent) and Hispanics (6.7 percent) in the fourth quarter of 2014 were each within 1 percentage point of their respective levels prior to the Great Recession. At the same time, the unemployment rate for blacks (11 percent), however, was 2.4 percentage points higher than it was at the end of 2007 and higher than the national unemployment rate at the peak of the recession (9.9 percent).

The report includes state-by-state changes in unemployment rates for whites, Hispanics, and blacks since the Great Recession, as well as the unemployment rates in the fourth quarter of 2014. Among individual states, Wisconsin (19.9 percent) has the highest unemployment rate for blacks, followed by Nevada (16.1 percent), Michigan (15.8 percent), the District of Columbia (15.7 percent), and Iowa (15.6 percent). The black unemployment rate in Virginia (8 percent), which is the lowest in the nation, is higher than the highest white unemployment rate (7 percent in Nevada).



READY TO READ: New Brookings Report Examines Gender Gap in Literacy, Common Core's Impact on Students' Reading Skills

Girls have outscored boys on every U.S. reading assessment since the 1970s, but recent gains in boys' reading achievement are narrowing that gap, according to a new report from the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution.

The *2015 Brown Center Report on American Education* includes three different studies on student learning. The first study examines the gender gap in literacy. For this study, the report's author, **Tom Loveless, a nonresident senior fellow at Brookings**, examined the most recent data from eight national tests of U.S. reading achievement: the National Assessment of Educational Progress Long Term Trend (NAEP-LTT), administered to students ages nine, thirteen, and seventeen; the NAEP Main Assessment, administered to students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades; the Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS); and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Loveless found that “the test score gaps between males and females are statistically significant on all eight assessments,” with the widest gender gaps among middle and high school students.

Although the gender gap in literacy has persisted for more than forty years, the magnitude of the gap remains relatively small compared to test score gaps between other student groups. For instance, on the 2012 NAEP-LTT for nine-year-olds, the average score for boys was 5 points lower than the average score for girls. By comparison, the gap between students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and their more affluent peers was 28 points, while the gap between English language learners and native English speakers was 34 points, according to the report. Furthermore, the gap between boys and girls on the NAEP-LTT has decreased since the test's first administration in 1971, with boys demonstrating larger gains than girls throughout the history of the test and particularly during the past decade.

The gender gap in reading is not limited to the United States; it exists worldwide.

“On the 2012 PISA, all OECD countries exhibited a gender gap, with females outscoring males by 23 to 62 points on the PISA scale,” the report notes. Finland, often praised for its outstanding student achievement, had the largest gap with females outscoring males by 62 points on the PISA scale—twice the U.S. gap. Finland’s gap also has widened since the previous administration of PISA in 2000. The report notes that “[t]he reading performance of Finnish boys is not statistically significantly different from boys in the U.S. (482) or from the average U.S. student, boys and girls (498). Finnish superiority in reading only exists among females.”

The *2015 Brown Center Report* addresses student reading achievement in its second study as well, which evaluates how implementing the Common Core State Standards for English language arts (CCSS-ELA) has impacted NAEP reading scores. In this study, Loveless analyzes two different indexes, based on 2011 and 2013 state survey data, that rate how thoroughly states have implemented the CCSS. States categorized as “strong implementers” of the CCSS reported in the 2011 survey that they spent more money on professional development, materials, and other programs to support the CCSS. States categorized a “strong implementers” based on the 2013 survey, meanwhile, said they planned to fully implement the CCSS by School Year 2012–13.

Loveless examined state scores on the fourth-grade NAEP between 2009 and 2013 to determine whether a relationship exists between gains on NAEP and implementation of the CCSS. He determined that “[s]tates that have aggressively implemented CCSS-ELA (referred to as ‘strong’ implementers in the study) evidence a one to one and one-half point larger gain on the NAEP scale compared to non-adopters of the standards. This association is similar in magnitude to an advantage found in a study of eighth-grade math achievement in last year’s [*Brown Center Report*].”

Admittedly, the positive effect is small and the analysis cannot verify a causal link between CCSS implementation and NAEP gains, but instead it simply establishes a correlation. Nonetheless, these preliminary results show some promising effects of the CCSS’s early impacts.

The *2015 Brown Center Report on American Education* is available at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2015/03/24-brown-center-report-loveless>.

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a free biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events 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. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor; Ariana Witt; Kristen Loschert; and Kate Bradley.

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