



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



**AFTER A VERY LONG WAIT, FINALLY TIME TO DEBATE: House and Senate to Consider Legislation This Week to Rewrite No Child Left Behind Act**

The U.S. Congress will consider major education reform legislation during the week of July 6 when it debates a rewrite of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as No Child Left Behind. Action will begin Tuesday, July 7, when the U.S. Senate begins debate on the Every Child Achieves Act. Later in the week, the U.S. House of Representatives will once again consider the Student Success Act, which was expected to pass the House on February 27 but was [pulled from consideration after conservative members began to waver in their support](#).

Jointly written by **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN)** and **Senator Patty Murray (D-WA)**, the committee's top Democrat, the Every Child Achieves Act (ECAA) was [passed by the HELP Committee by a unanimous 22–0 vote in April](#).

ECAA maintains NCLB's annual assessment schedule and requires states to report on the performance of various subgroups of students, but it removes NCLB's adequate yearly progress requirement and the sanctions that accompanied it. Universally praised for the bipartisan nature in which it was written, NCLB has drawn criticism for its failure to include critical safeguards for low-performing schools and traditionally underserved students.

“To live up to ESEA's legacy of advancing equity and providing opportunity for every child, we join with numerous civil rights and business groups in urging that further significant improvements be made to the bill to create the law that America's children deserve,” [said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan](#). “Every family and every community deserve to know that schools are helping all children succeed—including low-income students, racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities and students learning English. And they deserve to know that if students in those groups fall behind, their schools will take steps to improve, with the strongest action in the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools.”

The House's Student Success Act would go even further than its Senate counterpart in dialing back the federal role in education. Specifically, it would remove accountability safe guards for underserved students, eliminate most federal education programs, and no longer require Title I funds for low-income students to go to low-income schools.

For these reasons and more, the White House [issued a veto threat for the bill](#), saying it “abdicates the historic federal role in elementary and secondary education of ensuring the educational

progress of all of America’s students, including students from low-income families, students with disabilities, English learners, and students of color.”

**Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise** credits NCLB for highlighting educational disparities between white students and students from low-income families, students of color, and other traditionally disadvantaged student subgroups. At the same time, however, he says NCLB is “too heavy” in its approach to school reform by mandating one-size-fits-all reforms that treat all schools alike rather than tailoring support to meet a school’s unique challenges. He believes that both the Senate and House bills go too far in the other direction and are “too light” when it comes to critical safeguards for low-performing students and schools.

“Both bills require states to collect and report data on schools and provide extensive flexibility on how states can respond,” Wise writes in a [column for the Alliance’s High School Soup blog](#), “but neither actually requires states to act, instead permitting states to decide when, where, and if to intervene. Great discretion should be left to states, districts, and schools about *how* they respond; however, no discretion should exist about *whether* to respond.”



During floor debate in the U.S. Senate, several senators are expected to offer amendments to improve accountability and better ensure support for students and schools most in need. One amendment would ensure that schools receive targeted intervention and support when groups of students do not make academic achievement or graduation rate gains for two years in a row. Another amendment would provide comprehensive intervention and support for high schools that fail to graduate one-third or more of their students. A third amendment would add an updated version of the High School Graduation Initiative to support next generation high schools and dropout prevention and recovery.

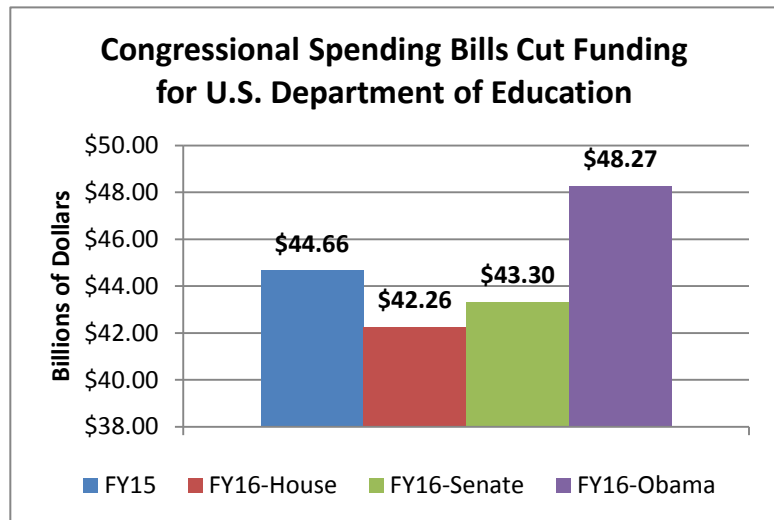
To learn more about how these amendments would address shortcomings in NCLB and ECAA, download the Alliance’s infographic, “Getting School Accountability Just Right,” available at [http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AEE\\_ESEA\\_infographic\\_FINAL.pdf](http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/AEE_ESEA_infographic_FINAL.pdf).

For additional background on congressional efforts to rewrite NCLB, visit <http://all4ed.org/esea/>.



## FUNDING FIGHTS: House and Senate Spending Bills Cut Billions of Dollars in Funding for Federal Education Programs, Draw Aggressive Response from Obama Administration

Last week, the U.S. House Appropriations Committee and the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee passed Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 spending bills that would cut discretionary funding—excluding Pell Grants—for the U.S. Department of Education by \$2.4 billion and \$1.36 billion, respectively, compared to FY15. Under President Obama’s FY16 budget request, funding would increase by \$3.61 billion.



The Senate Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education appropriations bill would provide a \$150 million increase for Title I, which targets funding to low-income school districts, and boost funding for special education by \$125 million. The House bill would maintain funding for Title I at the previous year’s level, but it would increase funding for special education by \$500 million.

Proposed funding levels for a sample of education programs targeting middle and high school students are outlined in the table below. For proposed funding levels for every program under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Education, visit <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget16/16action.pdf>.

Program	FY15	FY16 House	FY16 Senate	FY16 Obama
School Improvement Grants	\$506 million	\$0	\$450 million	\$556 million
Striving Readers	\$160 million	\$0	\$0	\$160 million
High School Graduation Initiative	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Advanced Placement	\$28 million	\$0	\$23 million	\$28 million
Next Generation High Schools Initiative	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$125 million
Career and Technical Education	\$1.1 billion	\$1.1 billion	\$1.1 billion	\$1.3 billion
Federal TRIO Programs	\$840 million	\$900 million	\$840 million	\$860 million
GEAR UP	\$302 million	\$323 million	\$302 million	\$302 million

“This bill prioritizes programs that will provide a significant benefit to all Americans including providing the National Institutes of Health with a \$2 billion increase to focus on advancing medical treatments, Precision Medicine and research to find a cure for Alzheimer’s and cancer,” said [U.S. Senate Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Roy Blunt \(R-MO\)](#).

Although they were pleased with the increases for medical research, Senate Democrats voted against the bill for its significant cuts to other domestic priorities, including education.

“While I appreciate Chairman Blunt’s interest in increasing research investments, this bill would make deep cuts to middle class priorities like health care, education, job training, worker protection programs, women’s health, and more,” [said Senator Patty Murray \(D-WA\), top Democrat on the Senate Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee.](#)

**U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** criticized Republicans for proposing cuts to programs such as early childhood education and Investing in Innovation that are “most important for transforming students’ lives,” [Duncan said in a video he posted to Twitter](#). “At a time when we need to keep getting better faster, ... Republicans in both the House and the Senate in Congress ... are talking about cutting education funding by literally billions of dollars from what the president is proposing.”

Duncan’s video was part of an aggressive campaign by the Obama administration against the Republican spending bills, which are based on levels set by the 2011 budget deal, also known as sequestration, and locked in by the budget plan that the U.S. Congress adopted in May. Under the plan, overall discretionary spending for FY16 can rise by less than 1 percent, creating a scenario in which a funding increase for one program often translates into a funding cut for another program.

“Sequestration was never intended to take effect: rather, it was supposed to threaten such drastic cuts to both defense and non-defense funding that policymakers would be motivated to come to the table and reduce the deficit through smart, balanced reforms,” wrote **Shaun Donovan, director of the Office of Management and Budget**, in a [letter to House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers \(R-KY\)](#). “The Republicans’ 2016 budget framework would bring base discretionary funding for both nondefense and defense to the lowest levels in a decade, adjusted for inflation. Compared to the president’s budget, the cuts would result in tens of thousands of the nation’s most vulnerable children losing access to high-quality early education, millions fewer workers receiving job training and employment services, efforts to improve schools and support teachers being undermined, with other impacts that would hurt the economy, the middle class, and Americans working hard to reach the middle class.”

Due to the wide differences between President Obama and congressional Republicans, the next step for the spending bills is unclear, with Senate Democrats holding up additional work on appropriations until Republicans agree to negotiate a budget deal that would increase funding for defense as well as domestic priorities such as education.

Absent a broader budget compromise that would lift spending levels, Congress will likely have to pass a series of temporary funding mechanisms, or “continuing resolutions,” to avoid a government shutdown when the fiscal year begins on October 1.



## **BUT ARE THEY ACCURATE? NPR Ed Raises Questions About Historic Increase in High School Graduation Rates**

In “The Truth About America’s Graduation Rates,” NPR Ed partnered with fourteen member stations around the country to examine the historic increase in the nation’s high school graduation rate from 72 percent in 2002 to an all-time high of 81.4 percent in 2013, as [announced by the U.S. Department of Education earlier this year](#).

**Anya Kamenetz, NPR’s lead education blogger**, explains in [an article](#) for the series that the urgency in reporting high school completion figures began in the early 2000s.

“The early 2000s were a dark time for state education statistics,” writes Kamenetz. “States could report high school graduation rates any old way they pleased, and many did. ... But what was missing was a single, clear, comparable and accurate measure of graduation rates.”

This, Kamenetz says, led to the National Governors Association—chaired by **U.S. Senator Mark Warner (D-VA)** who was governor of Virginia at the time—convening a task force on state high school graduation data in 2005, and ultimately the development of the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) and new regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Education in 2008 that finally put in place a tracking system for states to not only report numbers but also to improve on them.

Still, as NPR Ed finds, not all methods of improvement are created equal. NPR Ed takes into account the three major ways states and districts attempt to improve high school graduation rates—early intervention, alternative routes to a diploma, and “gaming the system by moving likely dropouts off the books”—and raises questions about whether graduation rates are as high as claimed. “All these strategies—good, bad and ambiguous—raise the question: What does a high school diploma mean? What should it mean? Make the bar too high and students are denied opportunity. Make the bar too low and the diploma becomes devalued.”

**Becky Vevea, an education reporter for Chicago’s WBEZ**, [calls out Chicago for using “questionable, quick fixes to improve their grad rates.”](#) Using records from Chicago Public Schools (CPS) obtained under a Freedom of Information Act, Vevea finds that at least 2,200 students from twenty-five Chicago high schools were counted as having transferred out of the district between 2011 and 2014.

“In reality, they were dropouts,” she writes. “The transfers aren’t factored into CPS graduation rates, while dropouts are.”

In the article, **CPS spokesperson Bill McCaffrey** acknowledges that the district has a problem, but he said officials do not plan to go back and adjust the rates. Instead, CPS plans to (1) require random spot checks of all school transfer data; (2) require principals to sign a document taking full responsibility for making sure that students reported as transfers are actually transfers; (3) require staff to attend training; and (4) refer any questionable activity to CPS’s law department and the district’s Office of the Inspector General.



Texas, which reported a high school graduation rate of 88 percent for the 2012–13 school year, also appears to be engaging in some questionable practices. [Reporting for KUT-FM, Katherine McGee](#) discovers a number of students who are “off the books,” or reported to be seeking different routes to a diploma but failing to obtain it.

“In the fall of 2009, Texas counted 360,373 ninth graders, and over the next four years, 289,298 received diplomas,” writes McGee. “That should translate roughly to an 80 percent graduation rate, all else being equal. But Texas actually reports an 88 percent grad rate—the second highest in the country.”

To explain the higher percentage, McGee introduces Jaye McCurtain, a student in San Antonio who left her public school to be homeschooled after her eighth-grade year. McCurtain missed the deadline to enroll in online classes and three years later, she has yet to complete her degree, though the state would count her amount its graduates as an “other leaver.” McGee says Texas uses this catch-all code for many nontraditional students, including those being homeschooled, and counted some 50,000 other leavers in the last four years. Those students are not considered as dropouts by the state, which muddles the reported data.

While Chicago and Texas might be using “fuzzy math” to boost their high school graduation rates, other areas have made program changes inside schools that might be lowering expectations for students and giving less rigorous course work to underperforming students.

**Jennifer Guerra of Michigan Radio** [tells the story of Kevin Mahone](#), a high school senior at Cody High School in Detroit where nearly all students are African American and qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a common indicator of poverty. The school was once considered a dropout factory, graduating only 60 percent of seniors each year. But the introduction of programs to help students quickly raise grades and the number of credits earned helped to change that.

“Even though Mahone’s mid-semester progress report said he was failing four classes, he wasn’t too worried,” Guerra writes. “That’s because he had a plan: To ask his teachers for ‘all this extra credit, try to turn these Fs to Cs before grades go in.’”

Guerra quotes **Jeremy Singer, a teacher at Cody**, who questions whether the school’s diplomas have been devalued. “I don’t think the degree from Cody right now is a proxy that says ‘Because you have this degree, we’re confident that you’ll get through college,’” Singer says. “And that’s the problem.”

Not every NPR Ed story for this series finds questionable practices and dubious gains. **Dan Carsen, an education reporter at WBHM**, examines the dramatic changes in Alabama’s high school graduation rate, which increased 8 percentage points from 2010 to 2013. **Alabama State Superintendent Tommy Bice** attributes the increase to setting a 90 percent graduation rate goal by 2020, more precise identification and monitoring of students with academic and attendance problems, and the state’s Alternative Learning Centers, which provide students with flexibility in learning and allows them complete school requirements with tailored programs that work with less traditional schedules.

In other parts of the country, NPR highlights efforts to help students graduate from high school through additional support. Graduation coaches, for example, lend guidance to students in Atlanta, Georgia. The program started in 2006 as an early intervention method for teens at risk of dropping out of school.

**Martha Dalton of WABE** [tells the story of Korey Thomas](#), a student from Henry County High School, who was disinterested in school and failing classes until a graduation coach intervened with personal and academic support and “constantly checked up on him, making sure he was doing homework and turning in assignments.”

Dalton adds that Thomas is attending college this fall and that “although it’s hard to credit one program for better graduation rates, state data and other research show the program helped students graduate who may not have otherwise.”

Kamenetz points out that the worth of a diploma can often be measured in the acquisition of employment and a livable wage, but “it will take decades to know whether the students graduating from high school today will reap the same kind of lifetime benefits that their predecessors did from those diplomas. Graduation rates make for good headlines and applause lines, but they can’t capture that kind of nuance.”

Given this information, what should the public think of the reported 81.4 percent high school graduation rate? NPR Ed quotes **Daria Hall, director of K–12 policy development at the Education Trust**. “I think we have to take it with a big grain of salt. It’s a lot better than it used to be; we used to have no confidence in graduation rates.”

To view an illustrated summary of NPR’s special project, “The Truth about America’s Graduation Rates,” and access other stories from the project, visit <http://apps.npr.org/grad-rates/>.

***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; Kristen Loschert; Ariana Witt; and Kate Bradley.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington, DC–based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. For more information, visit [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org). Follow the Alliance on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/all4ed](http://www.twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook ([www.facebook.com/all4ed](http://www.facebook.com/all4ed)), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog ([www.all4ed.org/blog](http://www.all4ed.org/blog)).