



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



CONGRESS PASSES FISCAL YEAR 2013 SPENDING BILL: Including Sequester Cuts, Bill Reduces Discretionary Funding for U.S. Department of Education by \$2.3 Billion

Last week, the U.S. Congress passed a Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 spending package that avoids a government shutdown by keeping the federal government funded through the end of the fiscal year on September 30. The bill provides \$65.8 billion in discretionary funding for the U.S. Department of Education—an amount that reflects the 5 percent across-the-board cut mandated by the sequester—compared to \$68.1 billion in FY 2012.

“This legislation provides funding for essential federal programs and services, helps maintain our national security, and takes a potential shutdown off the table,” [said House Appropriations Chairman Hal Rogers \(R-KY\)](#). “I’m proud that we were able to reach across the aisle—and across Capitol Hill—to produce a meaningful, bipartisan bill that funds the government responsibly. With the approval of this measure, we have laid the foundation for thoughtful and responsible consideration of appropriations bills, and can now focus our attention on next year’s work.”

An amendment offered by **Senate Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA)**—which ultimately fell short of the sixty votes needed for passage—would have increased funding for the National Institutes of Health, child care, and education. Among education programs, the amendment would have provided a \$107 million increase for Title I, which is targeted at low-income students; \$125 million more for special education; and \$14 million more for TRIO programs, which help low-income students progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to higher education.

“The spending package we’re considering this week leaves programs under the Labor-HHS-Education jurisdiction on autopilot,” [said Harkin](#). “I am proposing to replace the autopilot version of the Labor-HHS bill with a detailed, thoughtful, bicameral, bipartisan compromise. This is not my Labor-HHS bill. If I had my druthers, every dollar in the bill would be spent exactly how I wanted. But of course, compromise doesn’t work that way. This amendment includes priorities from the other side of the aisle, and from the other side of the Capitol.”



KEEPING COLLEGE WITHIN REACH: Alliance for Excellent Education Higher Education Expert Testifies Before House Education and the Workforce Committee on Fixing Federal Student Aid

Federal student aid spending increased to nearly \$237 billion this year, but students entering college find the system obtuse and financial support difficult to obtain. This summer, federal student loan interest rates will be up for debate again, and will rise, if Congress does not act. These two issues were the primary focuses of a March 13 U.S. House Education and the Workforce Committee hearing on improving the federal student aid system.



The hearing, entitled, “Keeping College Within Reach: Examining Opportunities to Strengthen Federal Student Loan Programs,” explored ways to simplify and strengthen the federal student aid system. The committee listened to testimony from and asked questions of a distinguished group of witnesses, including **Charmaine Mercer, vice president of federal policy at the Alliance for Excellent Education**. Mercer helped pen the Alliance’s report, [*Repairing a Broken System: Fixing Federal Student Aid*](#), which outlined a number of ways the federal government can fix the student aid system to focus on program access and completion.

In his [opening statement](#), **Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN)** noted that the federal government provided \$174 billion of the \$237 billion in financial aid in the 2011–12 school year and asked how such a massive government investment can be shrouded in confusion.

“Given this significant investment, it is troubling to learn students struggle to navigate the various federal student aid programs available to help them pay for college,” Kline said. “More work must be done to help our students and families understand the federal student aid system and make informed choices about their higher education options. Congress has a responsibility to explore ways we can strengthen and streamline federal student aid programs, making the process simpler for students, institutions, and families.”

Kline spoke of the scheduled Stafford Loan interest rate increase halted last summer that are due for another debate in the coming summer months. “When Congress approved legislation to temporarily stave off the Stafford Loan interest rate increase, my colleagues and I lent our support with the promise that we would use this time to work toward a long-term solution that better aligns interest rates with the free market,” he said.

In his [opening statement](#), **Ranking Member George Miller (D-CA)** discussed the challenges of a federal loan system that leaves students with an average of \$26,000 of debt upon undergraduate graduation. To combat the growing debt crisis, Miller recommended a short-term focus of ensuring that student interest rates do not double this summer and a long-term goal of recalculating interest rates for federal student loans.

“As we consider various solutions, we must not lose sight of the fact that these borrowers are the nation’s future,” Miller said. “If they are shackled by unmanageable debt, our economy will invariably suffer. We have a moral and economic obligation to ensure that all qualified students who want to attend college can afford to go.”

After the opening statements, Kline turned the room over to the expert panel. Mercer opened her remarks by noting that the current federal student aid system was originally intended to increase access to college. “Given the twenty-first-century needs of our economy—more students with higher degrees and skills—the federal government needs to carefully and thoughtfully reauthorize the Higher Education Act to reflect an emphasis on college completion,” she said.

Mercer laid out four specific recommendations for the committee to consider: (1) create student support systems, such as counseling, and an accountability system for all colleges and universities; (2) simplify the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) into three questions based on adjusted gross income, family size, and dependency status; (3) focus aid on the highest need students; and (4) provide support for middle class families.

“What our nation needs now is a thoughtful and purposeful consideration of postsecondary education policies,” Mercer said. “Students must continue to have access to postsecondary education and be provided with the necessary incentives to complete higher education, achieve individual prosperity, and become an integral part of the nation’s economy.”

Deborah J. Lucas, a Sloan Distinguished Professor of Finance at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, proposed a four-point plan to “increase the stability and transparency of budgetary costs” that included supporting income-based repayment plans for graduated students with debt owed to the federal government, and basing student loan interest rates on the market index.

Two additional experts offered their recommendations. **Jason Delisle, director of the Federal Education Budget Project**, argued for a simplified student loan repayment plan. **Justin Draeger, president and chief executive officer of the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators**, stated that his primary goal is to see the recalculation of the student loan interest rate changed to one that aligns more closely with the private market.

Testimonies and archived video from the hearing are available at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=322265>.



MASSIVE ONLINE OPEN COURSE FOR EDUCATORS: Alliance for Excellent Education and Friday Institute for Educational Innovation Offer First-of-Its-Kind Online Course for School District Leaders

On March 19, the Alliance for Excellent Education and Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University opened enrollment for a first-of-its-kind Massive Online Open Course for Educators (MOOC-Ed). Titled “Digital Learning Transition,” the free course will examine how the effective use of digital learning can help school districts meet educational challenges, including implementing college- and career-ready standards for all students and preparing teachers to make effective use of technology to enhance teaching and learning.

The course—a component of the Alliance’s “Project 24” initiative and the first of a series of MOOC-Eds planned by the Friday Institute—will help school district leaders develop a set of digital learning goals to address their students’ specific needs. Participating educators will learn how technology and the global information age impact both what students need to know and how and when student learning can take place. They will study the elements necessary for a successful digital learning transition, develop a set of goals for digital learning aligned to desired student outcomes, and create an action plan to meet these goals.

“By participating in this ground-breaking effort, educators can experience first-hand how digital learning can change teaching and improve learning,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “At the same time, they will develop a valuable plan for how to take their school or district through a digital learning transition.”

Throughout the course, participants will have access to digital learning experts who have successfully implemented digital learning efforts that are supporting teachers and positively impacting student learning. And by conducting the course on such a massive scale—literally thousands of district leaders can participate—participants will also benefit from “crowdsourcing,” a collaborative professional learning experience that uses the “wisdom of the crowd” to discuss ideas, share strategies and resources, and exchange constructive feedback with other participants in similar roles and schools.

“The Digital Learning Transition MOOC-Ed enables educators to experience using innovative technologies as learners and collaborators, which will help them gain insights into what these technologies can mean for students,” said **Glenn Kleiman, executive director of the Friday Institute**. “We look forward to having many innovative educators join us in exploring this new form of large-scale, flexible, multimedia, and collaborative professional development.”

Each of the course’s [seven sessions](#) will include core resources and supplemental materials around a specific topic, while allowing for a great deal of personalization and flexibility. Participants are expected to navigate their own paths, consistent with their own goals and the needs of their school or district, while being supported and guided by the facilitators, resources, and fellow participants.

Running from April 8 through May 24, the seven-week course is designed for school and district leaders, including superintendents, principals, curriculum directors, technology directors, financial officers, instructional coaches, lead teachers, and others involved in planning and implementing K–12 digital learning initiatives. Participants should expect to commit between two and four hours each week, but there will be opportunities for those who wish to invest more time and explore issues more deeply.

Interested individuals can obtain more information and register for the course at dlt.mooc-ed.org. After registering, they are strongly encouraged to take Project 24’s [free online self assessment](#) to help frame a vision for digital learning and specify how technology can help align efforts to achieve college- and career-ready standards. Upon completion of the self assessment, participants will receive a personalized report analyzing their district’s progress in integrating technology into instruction.

The MOOC-Ed is part of “[Project 24](#),” a ground-breaking new initiative led by the Alliance to help school districts plan for and effectively use technology and digital learning. Project 24 is an urgent call to action on the need for systemic planning around the effective use of technology and digital learning to achieve the goal of career and college readiness for all students. Project 24 participants benefit from free comprehensive district-level planning tools, expert advice, creative ideas, and tangible suggestions from experienced education experts and nonprofit education membership organizations. Already, more than 1,000 school leaders from nearly 500 school districts—representing 6.5 million students—have signed up to participate.

The [Digital Learning Transition MOOC-Ed](#) is provided by the [Friday Institute for Educational Innovation](#) as part of ongoing work to support the effective use of technologies and innovative teaching and learning practices in K–12 education.

“Make no mistake; digital learning holds the key to preparing millions of additional students for college and a productive career, but district leaders need to approach this opportunity with sound planning to leverage the potential and achieve the best results,” said Wise. “Going forward, our goal is to get every district to sign up and start planning.”



STATES’ PERSPECTIVES ON WAIVERS: New CEP Report Finds That States Appreciate Relief from NCLB, Express Concern About Long-Term Solutions

States are optimistic that waivers will help ease some of the unrealistic requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and improve learning for all students, but they are concerned about what will happen to the programs and policies in their waiver plans if the law is reauthorized, according a new report from the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at George Washington University.

“States ... expressed concern that a newly reauthorized [Elementary and Secondary Education Act] may dictate a sudden shift in accountability requirements, thus disrupting the state plans currently underway,” the report notes. “Specifically, states expressed concern that such a shift in accountability policies could erode tenuous stakeholder support or possibly cost more at a time when state budgets are just starting to recover from the recession.”

Because President Obama and the U.S. Congress were unable to come to an agreement to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), currently known as NCLB, the U.S. Department of Education granted states waivers from certain requirements of the law. The CEP report, *States’ Perspectives on Waivers: Relief from NCLB, Concern About Long-Term Solutions*, describes states’ early experiences in applying for waivers and their plans for implementing the new systems outlined in their applications. It is based on survey responses that CEP from thirty-eight states, including thirty-two states with approved waiver applications and six states whose applications were still pending as of fall 2012.¹

When asked why they applied for waivers, states gave several different reasons, but the most popular response was doubt that ESEA would be reauthorized in the next year combined with districts’ and schools’ needs for flexibility in meeting some of the law’s provisions, an answer

¹ The report counts the District of Columbia as a state.

given by twenty-seven states. Twenty-five states also said that too many of their schools were inappropriately identified as needing improvement under NCLB and that the reforms described in their waiver applications will increase the capacity in which state education agencies (SEAs) assist schools and districts needing reform.

The report finds that states are generally optimistic about the extent to which they expect new waiver-related requirements for college- and career- ready standards, educator evaluation systems, and differentiated accountability systems to improve student learning, but they were less convinced that reducing state administration requirements will greatly improve achievement.

“States believe they have put together accountability plans and other supports that will improve student learning,” said **Maria Ferguson, executive director of CEP**. “They see this as a real opportunity to customize accountability systems so they work more effectively in their individual states.”

Although every state reported that it had already adopted policies for college- and career-ready standards before requesting a waiver or intended to do so regardless of their waiver request outcome—and either already adopted or planned to adopt policies for assessments aligned to those standards—the report finds that waivers appear to have shaped state policies and accelerated some reforms, especially in the case of policies for educator evaluations and support systems. Regardless of policy changes they expected to make, states generally did not have to make legislative changes to meet the new waiver application requirements.

When asked their perceptions about the new accountability systems they proposed in their waiver plans, twenty-two states said that the new systems will correctly identify schools in need of improvement “significantly better” than the pre-waiver requirements of NCLB. The same number of states also expects the new accountability systems to increase the capacity in which SEAs assist schools identified for improvement.

One possible issue with these accountability systems is how states plan to base accountability decisions on the performance of broader groups of students than those listed in NCLB (students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), etc.). As the report notes, states that receive waivers may “use fewer, more broadly defined subgroups that combine two or more NCLB statutory subgroups or that are based on recent test performance, such as the lowest-scoring 25 percent or 30 percent of students in a school or all students scoring below the proficient level.” Twenty-six states plan to use these types of combined or performance-based subgroups upon receiving a waiver while twelve do not.

The report notes that some advocacy organizations, including the Alliance for Excellent Education, said that these policies could diminish attention to the learning needs of students from traditionally lower-achieving groups. In its recent report, [*The Effect of ESEA Waiver Plans on High School Graduation Rate Accountability*](#), the Alliance notes that accountability for the high school graduation rates of various student subgroups—students of color, low-income students, students with a disability, and ELLs—is weak or nonexistent in eleven states.

Most of the states surveyed said that it was “challenging” to design key aspects of the waiver accountability systems. According to the report, thirty-four states said it was “very challenging” or “somewhat challenging” to set new “annual measurable objectives,” (AMOs), which are

targets for student performance in reading and mathematics. Thirty-five states said the same about determining which actions to take for schools designed as priority or focus schools—two categories of low-performing schools required by waiver guidance—or in high-performing reward schools. Similar numbers of states also faced difficulties in determining the measures of student achievement to incorporate into the accountability system, the weight each measure of student achievement should receive, and how to hold schools accountable for the achievement of subgroups of students.

The report also finds that changes in teacher and principal evaluation systems are well underway, despite resistance in some states from teachers and that states have mixed views about whether implementing various aspects of the waivers will cost more than implementing similar NCLB provisions.

The complete report is available at <http://cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=418>.

Feedback on Accreditation Standards for Educator Preparation Due March 29

As the new national accreditor for educator preparation, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) is seeking public comments on the draft of the next generation of accreditation standards for educator preparation developed by the CAEP Commission on Standards and Performance Reporting. All stakeholders in education and educator preparation are encouraged to review the draft standards and submit feedback by March 29, 2013, via <http://standards.caepnet.org>.

“CAEP is a new kind of accrediting body that drives innovation and change, and this next generation of standards is a key part of that,” said **CAEP President James G. Cibulka**. “The nation has raised the bar for our students and for our teachers. Today’s teachers must challenge and engage all learners. Now we must raise the bar for preparation programs to help the nation meet these ambitious goals.”

The Commission, which includes **Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise**, was charged with developing the next generation of accreditation standards based on evidence, continuous improvement, innovation, and clinical practice for all preparation providers. The Commission was also charged with recommending transparent CAEP public accountability reporting with multiple measures, including those directly linked to student achievement.

Accreditation is a nongovernmental activity based on peer review that serves the dual functions of assuring quality and motivating improvement. More than 900 educator preparation providers will initially participate in the CAEP accreditation system, which serves all providers currently accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council.

More information about CAEP and the Commission is available at <http://caepnet.org/>.

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; Cyndi Waite; and Kate Bradley.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance, visit www.all4ed.org; follow the Alliance on Twitter (www.twitter.com/all4ed); Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed); and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).