



ALLIANCE FOR  
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

# Straight A's:

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## EDUCATION SHOVED ASIDE: House Passes \$550 Billion Tax Plan, Leaves Out Popular Education Initiatives

Last week, **U.S. House Education & the Workforce Committee Chairman John Boehner (R-OH)** and other members of the House Republican Conference gathered the media to praise schoolteachers for their dedicated service to America's students, and they highlighted three bills that would benefit the nation's educators. At the same time, the Republican leadership in the House was agreeing on a tax bill that included *none* of these provisions. As Ways and Means Committee members struggled to fit their various tax proposals into the bill's \$550 billion package, they apparently could find no room for teacher tax credits, student-loan-forgiveness proposals, or even a "Crayola" tax credit, which would reimburse teachers for out-of-pocket classroom expenses.

### Education Not on the List: Highlights of the \$550 Billion House Republican Tax Plan

Provision	Cost
Reduce tax rates on capital gains and dividends	\$277 billion
Accelerate the phase-in of income tax rate cuts enacted in 2001	\$74 billion
Accelerate expansion of lowest tax bracket and married couples tax break in 2001 law	\$62 billion
Accelerate the 2001 law's child tax credit increase	\$45 billion
Net Operating Loss carryback	\$15 billion
Narrow applications of alternative minimum tax	\$53 billion
Increase investment that small business can deduct as expenses	\$3 billion
Bonus depreciation for all businesses	\$22 billion

*Source: Joint Committee on Taxation*

### Left Out and Left Behind—Teacher Tax Credits Not Included

Two teacher tax credit proposals enjoy bipartisan support and would benefit educators around the country. The Low-income Educator Assistance and Relief Now (LEARN) Act, or H.R. 1643, a bill sponsored by **Rep. Heather Wilson (R-NM)**, would help hard-to-staff schools in both rural and urban areas attract and retain high-quality teachers.

## Education Shoved Aside

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If enacted, the bill would provide a \$2,000 tax credit to any teacher or principal who teaches in a Title I-eligible school (that is, a school in which at least 40 percent of students come from families in poverty), and would cost the federal government \$20 billion over 10 years. While LEARN currently enjoys the support of 48 cosponsors from both sides of the aisle, it was left behind during consideration of the tax plan. Over the last month, nine cosponsors have been added to the original list of 39: **Reps. Joe Baca (D-CA), Judy Biggert (R-IL), Vernon J. Ehlers (R-MI), Barney Frank (D-MA), Jon C. Porter (R-NV), Shelly Moore Capito (R-WV), Bob Filner (D-CA), Amo Houghton (R-NY), and Michael K. Simpson (R-ID).**

(A complete list of cosponsors is available at <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/D?d108:1643:./list/bss/d108HR.lst:@@@P|TOM:/bss/d108query.html>.)

The second bill, the Teacher Tax Relief Act of 2003, sponsored by **Rep. Dave Camp (R-MI)**, would increase the “Crayola” tax credit, the amount that teachers can deduct for out-of-pocket expenses, from the current level of \$250 to \$400. It would also allow educators to include professional development costs within that \$400 deduction. Under current law, up to \$250 is deductible, but only for classroom expenses. Currently the bill has more than 100 cosponsors, both Republican and Democrat.

(A complete list of cosponsors is available at <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/D?d108:785:./list/bss/d108HR.lst:@@@P|TOM:/bss/d108query.html>.)

## Loan-Forgiveness Proposals in the House of Representatives

Another proposal featured at Chairman Boehner’s press conference was a student-loan-forgiveness bill introduced by **Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC)**, which would expand federal student-loan forgiveness—from the current maximum of \$5,000 to a new maximum of \$17,500—for Americans who teach math, science, or special education in disadvantaged schools. Wilson’s bill currently has 13 cosponsors.

(A complete list of cosponsors is available at <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/D?d108:438:./list/bss/d108HR.lst:@@@P|TOM:/bss/d108query.html>.)

A similar bill, introduced by **Rep. George Miller (D-CA)**, would also expand the federal loan-forgiveness program for teachers to \$17,500, but in addition would extend loan forgiveness to college graduates who enter the child care and nursing fields as well as other “high-priority public service careers.” Currently, 65 cosponsors have signed on to Miller’s bill.

(A complete list of cosponsors is available at <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/D?d108:1306:./list/bss/d108HR.lst:@@@P|TOM:/bss/d108query.html>.)

## Teachers Put on Hold

Research has shown that teacher quality is the single greatest contributor to gains in student achievement. So why are tax credits for teachers left out of the discussion when Congress begins debate on tax plans? The U.S. House of Representatives, despite its strong pro-education and high-teacher-quality rhetoric, still does not seem to see education as a top priority, especially when it comes up against corporate interests.

In the Senate, meanwhile, **Finance Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley (R-IA)** announced that he would include \$20 billion in unspecified aid to states as part of the tax bill currently on the table, but he faces stiff opposition from leading conservatives. For their part, Senate Democrats released a plan that would provide \$40 billion to states, including \$6 billion for the implementation of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*. It is too early to tell what the Senate will do with its tax plan, but it does appear that, for now at least, providing incentives for our best teachers to work in high-needs schools will have to wait, and may even become an election issue in 2004.



### THE ALLIANCE FOR EXCELLENT EDUCATION LAUNCHES HIGH-QUALITY TEACHER AWARENESS EFFORT

The No Child Left Behind Act, passed by Congress in 2001, requires that every teacher in the nation be highly qualified by the 2005–06 school year. But what is the definition of a “highly qualified” teacher? And how can parents tell whether their child’s teacher meets the standard?

As part of **Teacher Appreciation Week**, the Alliance for Excellent Education last week launched an initiative designed to help parents, educators, policymakers, and a concerned public better understand what it means to be a highly qualified teacher. The effort will advocate for the incentives and supports necessary to attract and retain highly qualified teachers in all of America’s schools, and will include:

- a bumper sticker—reading “*My child has a highly qualified teacher. Does yours?*”—designed to pique the interest of parents and others regarding highly qualified teachers, and directing the reader to the Alliance’s website for additional information;
- an updated policy brief, *Pending Federal Legislation Related to the Alliance’s Teacher and Principal Quality Initiative*, which lists legislation that could help states and localities recruit and retain highly qualified teachers; and
- the re-release of the Alliance report *New-Teacher Excellence: Retaining Our Best*, which examines what is known about effective teacher induction programs—that is, those that provide mentoring, training, and support for new teachers—and offers examples of programs around the nation that serve as models.

Information about teacher quality is now available at a new area of the Alliance’s website, and includes a legal definition of a “highly qualified” teacher, questions for parents to ask in order to determine the qualifications of their child’s teacher, and links to other informative sites on the Web.

(The webpage is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/policymakers/quality.html>)



## HOUSE PASSES REAUTHORIZATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION LAW: Mandatory Full Funding Left Out

Late last month, the House of Representatives passed a bill that makes several important changes to the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*, the law that provides a free public education to over 6 million children with disabilities in the United States. At the same time, a coalition of approximately 40 Republican members joined almost every Democratic member in defeating two amendments that would have provided federal funds to disabled children who attend private schools.

One of the provisions included in the House-passed version is an attempt to limit the number of children who are misdiagnosed as special education students. Toward this end, the bill allows states to use up to 15 percent of their IDEA funding for programs that would provide early intervention. Supporters of the legislation, introduced by **Rep. Michael Castle (R-DE)**, believe that these programs can help identify students who might only have a problem with one skill, such as reading, and prevent them from being labeled “learning disabled.”

The bill also makes changes to reduce paperwork and address concerns over how to discipline disabled students. While current law allows schools to remove disabled children from the classroom only for serious offenses—such as bringing weapons or drugs to school—the House-passed legislation would treat disabled students the same as nondisabled students for any violation of school policy. As a result of this provision, the Council for Exceptional Children, the Children’s Defense Fund, and other organizations that represent disabled children were opposed to the bill.

Some organizations have been critical of the bill because it does not address mandatory funding for IDEA. In 1975, when the special education law was first enacted, Congress agreed to reimburse states for 40 percent of the program’s cost. While the bill does not specifically deal with mandatory funding, it does authorize an additional \$2.2 billion for fiscal year 2004, and another \$2.5 billion for FY 2005, and it would set a course to reach the 40 percent funding level within seven years. However, these numbers are only *authorization* levels; actual funding would remain at the mercy of the yearly decisions of the Appropriations Committee and the overall cap in the congressional budget on all discretionary programs. (For instance, in FY 2003, programs authorized under the *No Child Left Behind Act* were funded at \$6 billion below their authorized level.)

Supporters of mandatory funding believe that making special education funding an entitlement program is the only way to ensure that Congress will reach its goal. **Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD)** told *CQ Weekly* that mandatory funding for IDEA was the only way to avoid “rolling the dice every year with the Committee on Appropriations.” Even with increases over the past few years, IDEA funding for FY 2003 would cover only 19 percent of the program’s cost.

On the Senate side, **Sens. Judd Gregg (R-NH)** and **Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)**, the chairman and ranking member, respectively, of the Senate Health, Education, and Labor Committee, have been working on a bipartisan bill over the last several months. They aim to finish their version of the bill before the Memorial Day holiday.



## **LITERACY TROUBLES IN OUR NATION'S HIGH SCHOOLS: California Columnist Offers Possible Suggestions for Parents**

Last month, the Alliance for Excellent Education released *Left Out And Left Behind: NCLB and the American High School*, a new report that lifted the curtain on low reading scores and high dropout rates in high schools throughout the country. It showed that 714,000 high school seniors (23 percent) have difficulty reading on the eve of their high school graduation, with a wide disparity among states. For example, while 16 percent of eighth-grade students read below basic levels in Maine, 39 percent of students in Mississippi fall into that category.

In California, this problem is especially acute. In a recent article for the *Contra Costa Times*, a newspaper covering the San Francisco Bay area, Suzanne Pardington wrote about the difficulty many California high school students experience when trying to read at their grade level. "In California last year," she writes, "39 percent of ninth-graders scored at the bottom of national reading tests, with the percentage rising as high as 89 percent at an East Bay continuation school."

In the fall of 2002, however, poor readers in several Bay Area ninth-grade classes were assigned to a special reading class, in which students first learned to recognize basic words and sounds and then moved on to reading first- or second-grade texts. Now, as the end of the 2002–03 school year approaches, teachers of these classes say that many students have advanced several grade levels in their reading ability; some ninth graders who began the year reading at the second- or third-grade level now read closer to a seventh- or eighth-grade level. And their grades have not just gone up in English; they have also shown improvement in other classes across the curriculum.

There is still, however, more work to be done: despite being able to read freely through a text, some students continue to struggle with reading comprehension, and also have difficulty putting ideas and themes onto paper. According to Pardington, "Even a student with a fourth-grade reading level eventually managed to write a simple five-paragraph essay with a thesis sentence, supporting paragraphs, and a conclusion. But colleges expect far more sophisticated work."

(Pardington's article is available at <http://www.bayarea.com/mld/cctimes/5734200.htm>.)

### **Pardington's Follow-Up Article Offers Advice to Parents**

In a follow-up piece to the article mentioned above, Suzanne Pardington offers advice on how parents can help their own children learn to read better. She suggests that parents who suspect that their child may have trouble reading should begin at the school: they can start by finding out their child's reading level, or asking for him or her to be tested.

Pardington also recommends taking advantage of free tutoring services, which may be available from local libraries, community centers, or churches. Private tutoring services are also an option, but can be costly. However, she adds, "Under the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation, students who attend designated 'program improvement' schools can demand that the school district pay for it."

(Pardington's article is available at <http://www.bayarea.com/mld/cctimes/living/education/5788416.htm>.)



## **YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION?: National Writing Commission Calls for New Emphasis on Writing Skills**

“American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom.” So begins *The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution*, a new report by the **National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges**.

Noting that nearly 66 percent of high school seniors do not write a three-page paper even as often as once a month in their English classes, *The Neglected “R”* calls for a dramatic increase in the amount of time and money that school districts devote to student writing. The report also argues that English class should not be the only time that students are asked to put words on paper. It notes that a full 75 percent of high school seniors never receive a writing assignment in history or social studies, and asks for a change in state and local guidelines that would require writing in every curriculum at all grade levels.

Without nurturing and building a student’s writing skill in his early years of schooling, the task is passed on to colleges and the business world. According to the report, more than 50 percent of college freshmen are unable to produce papers relatively free of language errors or to analyze arguments or synthesize information. “The writing weaknesses of incoming college students costs our campuses up to \$1 billion annually. And business leaders complain about the writing skills of new employees,” said Commission Chairman C. Peter Magrath, president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.

Along with the report’s release, the commission announced the launch of a campaign, the Writing Challenge to the Nation, which will work to implement the report’s findings. No stranger to campaigns himself, former senator **Bob Kerrey** will lead the effort.

(To download the report, visit the commission at <http://www.writingcommission.org/>.)

### **National Writing Project Helps Teachers**

The National Writing Project (NWP), a nationwide professional development program for teachers, was founded in 1974 at the University of California, Berkeley. Currently located in approximately 175 sites throughout all 50 states, NWP works to enhance student achievement by improving the teaching of writing in the nation’s schools.

The National Writing Project receives federal funding, which it passes along in grants to local sites that operate from university campuses and collaborate with surrounding schools and districts. These sites operate on a teachers-teaching-teachers model: successful teachers attend invitational summer institutes, where they can examine their classroom practices, conduct research, and develop their own writing skills; then, during the following school year, these teachers provide professional development workshops for other educators in their local schools and communities.

Collectively, these sites serve approximately 100,000 teachers every year, grades kindergarten through university, in all disciplines. The NWP model is based on three major principles: that teachers are the key to education reform, that teachers make the best educators of other teachers, and that teachers benefit from studying and conducting research.

(Additional information about the National Writing Project is available at <http://www.writingproject.org/>.)



## **ROLLER COASTER RIDE FOR SMALL CLASS SIZE IN CALIFORNIA: Budget Cuts Force Districts to Consider Up to 32 Students Per Class**

Faced with a budget gap of approximately \$8.2 billion and cuts to other education programs, California lawmakers have targeted the state's class-size reduction program as a possible source of badly needed funds. This news is especially surprising given the unlikely partnership legislators have been able to form with state educators, who have admitted that small class size is a luxury the state might not be able to afford.

Earlier this month, the California state legislature began considering a bill that would raise the class-size cap from 20 to 22 students per teacher in kindergarten through third grade. Other legislation under consideration would raise the limit to as many as 25 students. Even with an increase in the cap, some school systems are planning to go beyond the legal limit and raise primary-grade classes to as many as 32 students, which would potentially save them enough money to make up for the overall reduction in state funding they see as inevitable. Such a violation would come with a penalty—the district would have to forfeit the \$906 per student that the state pays for smaller classes. But the penalty may not be enough to make districts obey the law; some districts say the funding they receive from the state does not begin to cover the cost of extra teachers and classrooms that accompany smaller class size.

In an article for the *Los Angeles Times*, Eric Hanushek, a conservative economist at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, writes that California's budget gap could have a silver lining if it does, in fact, force the state to consider eliminating its class-size mandate. "There is the possibility that the budget predicament offers an escape from the costly and ineffective policy of blanket reductions in class size. Freeing our schools of this Sacramento mandate, and allowing districts greater latitude in deciding how to spend their funds, would produce far into the future."

Hanushek writes that school districts would be better off if they could direct money away from reducing class size and put it toward the hiring of good teachers; he argues that a good teacher in a large class is more preferable than a mediocre teacher in a small class. However, research consistently shows that smaller class sizes result in significant achievement gains for students, especially poor, minority students in urban schools and in younger grades. New teachers cite small class sizes as the number one way to improve teacher quality, ahead of more professional development or training and higher salaries.

(Articles are available at <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-classsize1may01,1,7632151.story>; and <http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/suncommentary/la-op-hanushek27apr27,1,7916474.story?coll=la%2Dheadlines%2Dsuncomment>.)

**Straight A's: An Update on Public Education** is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both in Washington, D.C., 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 6 million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.