



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



SENATE PASSES 2005 EDUCATION SPENDING BILL: Striving Readers Slated to Receive a \$10 Million Increase

On October 27, the U.S. Senate passed its version of the fiscal year 2006 Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education spending bill by a vote of 94 to 3. The bill, which includes a \$10 million increase for the Striving Readers program, would provide \$56.7 billion for the U.S. Department of Education, a figure that is equal to the level passed by the U.S. House of Representatives, and \$670 million more than the president's request.

The bill includes \$12.84 billion for Title I, a \$100 million increase over last year, but more than \$500 million less than the amount requested by President Bush, and close to \$10 billion less than the amount authorized in the No Child Left Behind Act for FY 2006 (\$22.75 billion). The bill also includes \$10.69 billion for special education, an increase of \$100 million over last year, and \$13.18 billion for Pell Grants, which increases funding for the program to \$812 million, but freezes the maximum grant award at \$4,050.

During debate on the Senate floor, several senators offered amendments to increase funding for education programs but were defeated on largely party lines. An amendment by **Senator Robert C. Byrd (D-WV)** would have increased Title I funding by \$5 billion to \$17.84 billion, and an amendment by **Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY)** would have increased funding for special education by \$4 billion to \$14.69 billion

Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) was able to win approval for a \$30 million amendment for programs that support Hispanic students, as well as a \$4.9 million amendment that restored funding for the Dropout Prevention program at the FY 2005 level. Bingaman and **Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX)** also were able to secure passage of a \$7 million amendment to increase funding for the Advanced Placement program.

Both the House and Senate versions of the education spending bills now go to conference, where a compromise must be reached on spending totals for programs. Congress is expected to pass a final version of the bill before Thanksgiving. If passed at its current funding level of \$56.7 billion, the FY 2006 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education appropriations bill would essentially freeze education spending when compared to last year—the first such freeze for education funding in a decade.

A chart comparing the proposed spending totals for education programs that help middle and high school students as included in the president's FY 2006 budget request and in the FY 2006 Labor, HHS, and Education appropriations bills as passed by the House and Senate is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/StraightAs/Fiscal06ProgramChart.pdf>.



NATION'S REPORT CARD SHOWS NEED FOR IMPROVEMENT: Eighth-Grade Reading Scores Continue to Decline

Reading scores for eighth-grade students continue to decline as scores for the nation's fourth-grade students rose slightly, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results that were released on October 19. The assessment—also called the “Nation’s Report Card”—showed that, nationwide, the average score for fourth-grade students (219 on a 500-point scale) increased by one point from 2003, while the average eighth-grade score (262) was one point lower than in 2003 and two points lower than in 2002.

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings greeted the report as further evidence that No Child Left Behind is working. “These results, like the long-term July data, confirm that we are on the right track with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), particularly with younger students who have benefited from the core principles of annual assessment and disaggregation of data,” she said. “The results in fourth grade are particularly encouraging, and we are truly heartened by the continued narrowing of the achievement gap.”

Other observers were not as happy with the results. “The absence of really bad news isn’t the same as good news, and if you’re concerned about education and closing achievement gaps, there’s simply not enough good news in these national results,” said **Ross Weiner, policy director of the Education Trust**. “There’s been a discernible slowdown in progress since ’03, at a time when we desperately need to accelerate gains.”

A *New York Times* editorial on October 22 questioned whether NCLB had run its course and if additional gains could be expected in the future. “No Child Left Behind has reached that perilous interim phase that all reforms must eventually pass through if they are to survive,” it read. “It has reaped the easy gains that were achieved by merely paying more attention to the problem . . . This week’s test scores are not the end of reform. But they could well spell the beginning of a downward spiral.”

According to the results, 29 percent of American eighth graders in public schools read “below basic,” indicating that they have no literal understanding of what they read and putting them at great risk of dropping out of high school. Research shows that students who enter ninth grade reading significantly below grade level are twenty times more likely to drop out of high school than are their highest achieving classmates.

Among minority groups, there was some improvement. Asian, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaskan Native eighth-grade students improved their average score over the last two years, while average scores for white and African-American eighth-grade students declined by one point. However, a large achievement gap of 22–28 percent continues to exist between white and Asian eighth-grade students and the rest of their classmates, although it has narrowed slightly since 2003.

The results also showed a 23 percent achievement gap between students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and those who are not. In an analysis of the 2003 NAEP scores, Standard & Poor’s found that poverty is the demographic indicator most closely correlated with student

performance. In fact, when each state's results on the 2003 NAEP were adjusted for their respective levels of student poverty—in effect leveling the playing field between states with large populations of economically disadvantaged students and those with a relatively smaller percentage of those pupils—most states performed similarly.

Bush, Spellings Use Stagnant Eighth-Grade NAEP Scores to Promote High School Agenda

In a meeting with Spellings to discuss the report card, **President George W. Bush** highlighted the narrowing of the achievement gap in fourth-grade reading and math, but used the opportunity to push for funding that would improve the literacy skills of older students. “We’ve got work to do in eighth-grade reading. And that’s why we’ve discussed the Striving Readers program,” he said. “We hope Congress funds that program, to make sure that there’s intense focus in the middle schools reading and math, just like there’s intense focus in the early grades in reading and math.”

Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise agreed. “Reading is the heart of learning, and the nation is in the literacy emergency room, showing a flat line on the education EKG,” he said. “The results, nationally and for each state, clearly demonstrate that we still are not doing what is needed to help our older students build the reading skills they will need to deal with increasingly complex high school courses. The investments made in early grades to teach our kids to read are critical, but we must continue to intervene throughout their school years to assure that they are maintaining and expanding the literacy skills that are so necessary for success in life.”

In an October 20 op-ed in *USA Today*, Secretary Spellings used the Nation’s Report Card results to advocate for the president’s proposal to expand No Child Left Behind into high schools. Noting the higher scores in fourth-grade math and reading and eight-grade math, Spellings said that scores for high school students have “barely budged” and “needed a boost.” “President Bush’s High School Initiative would enable high schools to measure student performance in three grades and offer intensive, early instruction to students struggling with reading or math.”

The 2005 NAEP results are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.

Secretary Spellings’s op-ed, “Tests Will Drive Gains,” is available at http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2005-10-19-oppose_x.htm.

“Happy Talk on School Reform” is available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/22/opinion/22sat3.html>.

Standard & Poor’s analysis of the 2003 NAEP data is available at <http://www.schoolmatters.com/>. It will soon be updated based on the 2005 NAEP results.

For a state-by-state breakdown on the 2005 NAEP results, visit the Alliance for Excellent Education’s website at http://www.all4ed.org/map_states.html and click on the name of your state.

Higher State Scores Fail to Translate into Higher Scores on National Test

Gains on state eighth-grade reading tests have not translated into higher scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), according to a new analysis from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. The analysis examined twenty-nine states and found that nineteen states reported an increase in the percentage of students who scored “proficient” or above on the *state* test from 2003 to 2005. However, no state showed a corresponding increase in the percentage of students at proficient or above on the *national* test (NAEP). In fact, only three states made progress at NAEP’s “basic” level.

“The much-discussed ‘race to the bottom’ appears to have begun,” said **Fordham Foundation President Chester E. Finn, Jr.** “If states ease their standards, construct simple-minded tests, or set low passing scores, they can mislead their own citizens and educators into thinking that just about everyone is proficient.”

The analysis found Alabama, California, Idaho, Arizona, Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky among the worst offenders. In these states, the difference between the percentage gain on the state test and the national test ranged from eleven to five percentage points. For example, while Alabama reported that an additional 11 percent of its students reached proficiency on its state test, no additional students scored at proficient on the national test. In Indiana, the state reported that an additional 3 percent of its students reached proficiency on the state test, but the percentage of Indiana students who scored at proficient on the national test actually declined by 5 percent.

A *Washington Post* article noted that the mostly flat results on the NAEP test barely resembled the results on most state tests, which “tend to yield dramatic gains for a few years, level off, then vanish, eclipsed by a newer, better test.” In the article, state education officials stressed that while the material on the state test is drilled into students and acts as a singular focus for teachers, the material might not necessarily align with the national test. “Consensus is building among officials that ‘proficient’ on the national assessment more closely resembles ‘basic’ on the state tests,” the article reads.

The Fordham analysis noted that NAEP functions as an “external” audit of state progress toward proficiency under NCLB. “While you might expect to see stronger gains on state tests tied to state standards and curricula, a significant amount of those gains should show up on a benchmark test like NAEP, especially at the lower ‘basic’ level,” said **Fordham Vice President Michael J. Petrilli.** “Otherwise you have to ask whether states are blurring the truth to make themselves look better.”

The complete Fordham Foundation analysis is available at http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/about/press_release.cfm?id=19.

“State Gains Not Echoed in Federal Testing” is available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/23/AR2005102301330.html>.



FOCUS ON ADOLESCENT LITERACY NEEDED AT STATE AND SCHOOL LEVELS: Three New Reports Call for Literacy Instruction in Higher Grades

An old Buddhist proverb reads “If a seed of lettuce will not grow, we do not blame the lettuce. Instead, the fault lies with us for not having nourished the seed properly.” Such could be the sentiment behind the flurry of activity around adolescent literacy over the last few weeks. During this time, three separate organizations released new reports on the subject. While different in their target audiences, all three reports agreed that reading instruction beyond the third grade is a must for all states and schools if students are to be properly prepared for postsecondary education and the workforce.

The first two reports, from the National Governors Association (NGA) and the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), highlight successful state efforts that are

already tackling the literacy crisis in middle and high schools. Both reports urge states to reconsider the role that literacy instruction can play in improving secondary schools. The third report, from the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), acts as a field guide on adolescent literacy for school leaders and gives practical steps on how to confront the deficit in literacy skills in secondary schools.

In *Reading to Achieve: A Governor's Guide to Adolescent Literacy*, the NGA culls five recommendations from existing state best practices to help governors in their attempts to improve adolescent literacy achievement in their states: 1) build support for a state focus on adolescent literacy; 2) raise literacy expectations across grades and curricula; 3) support school and district literacy plans; 4) build educators' capacity to provide adolescent literacy instruction; and 5) measure progress in adolescent literacy at school, district, and state levels.

“Strong reading, writing, and thinking skills have never been more important for success in school and the workplace than they are in today’s information age,” said **John Thomasian, director of the NGA Center for Best Practices**. “This guide will help governors tackle this critical issue head-on. Governors understand that nearly two out of every three jobs in the coming decade will require postsecondary education, and the fastest-growing job sectors require the highest literacy and education demands.”

The NASBE report, *Reading at Risk: The State Response to the Crisis in Adolescent Literacy*, strongly recommends that every state “develop and vigorously implement a statewide literacy plan to ensure that all students can read proficiently.” It notes that most reform in the arena of adolescent literacy has taken place “at the margins,” rather than the full-scale effort by states that is needed to address the issue.

The report stresses that improving literacy is the key to raising student achievement and generating school improvement. “Literacy is the linchpin of standards-based reform,” it reads. “As literacy skills improve, student achievement rises not only in reading and writing but across the curriculum spectrum, a benefit that has profound consequences for the ultimate success of standards-based reform.”

The NASSP report, *Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals*, approaches the problem at the school level. It calls for a greater focus on reading skills at the middle and high school levels, but acknowledges that many schools do not have the “trained staff, resources, and fiscal support to ensure supplemental and supportive literacy programs.”

In order to fully implement a successful adolescent literacy program at the secondary school level, the report identifies several key elements that must be in place, including committed and supportive school leaders, ongoing research-based professional development, and highly effective teachers in every content area who can provide explicit instruction to improve comprehension.

“By using the key elements as a foundation for implementing [an adolescent literacy program], schools will not only experience improved literacy in the present, but also impact the long-range

Focus on Adolescent Literacy Needed at State and School Levels (Continued from p. 5)

academic success of their students by enhancing their chances for postsecondary education and future employability,” said **Dr. Melvina Phillips**, the report’s author. “It is a task that can no longer be ignored.”

The NGA report is available at
<http://www.nga.org/Files/pdf/0510GOVGUIDELITERACY.PDF>.

An executive summary of the NASBE report is available at
http://www.nasbe.org/recent_pubs/reading_at_risk.htm.

The NASSP report is available at http://www.principals.org/s_nassp/sec.asp?CID=62&DID=62.



COLLEGE COSTS CONTINUE TO RISE: Need for Remedial Courses Mean Many College Students Must Pay Top Dollar for High School–Level Material

In a blog posting on the Lumina Foundation for Education’s new website on college access, Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise said that escalating college costs have many college freshmen wishing that their high school years had better prepared them for the rigors of postsecondary education. “‘Relearning’ material from high school costs college students both time and money,” he wrote. “Not only do they have to pay for courses they could have taken for free in high school, many students also lose semesters on their degree path.”

Based on a new report from the College Board, the rise in college tuitions has slowed, but going to college is not getting any cheaper. According to *Trends in College Pricing*, tuition and fees have increased by 7.1 percent at four-year public institutions since last year, compared to a 5.9 percent increase at four-year private institutions and 5.4 percent at two-year public institutions. Although the pace of tuition increase has slowed, student aid continues to struggle to keep up. In its companion report, *Trends in Student Aid*, the College Board reports that average aid per student increased by only 3 percent between 2003–04 and 2004–05, after adjusting for inflation.

While the percentage increases in tuition and fees at public institutions were smaller in 2005–06 than they were in the last two years, they have more than doubled over the last twenty years, from \$2,373 in 1985–86 to \$5,491 in 2005–06. Similar increases were seen at two-year public institutions and four-year private institutions.

“Socioeconomic status and college success cannot be separated from the serious problem of unequal academic opportunity within our schools,” said **College Board President Gaston Caperton**. “In addition to increasing the affordability of higher education, we need to make sure that students from all backgrounds have the opportunity to prepare for college. As well, all families should be made aware of the financial aid process and the long-term benefits, both financial and personal, of investing in a college education.”

Many students around the country, especially from minority or low-income families, are the first in their family to consider going to college. Unlike their more well-off peers, their families cannot afford Kaplan or Princeton Review classes to help them prepare for the SAT. Also, with an average student-to-counselor ratio close to 500 to 1 nationwide (and 1,000 to 1 in California),

many students do not receive the guidance they need to wade through scholarship forms and college applications. In fact, after going through the college selection process with her oldest daughter and realizing how confusing it is for families, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings recently formed the Commission on the Future of Higher Education. The commission will focus on ensuring America's system of higher education remains the finest in the world and continues to meet the needs of America's diverse population by expanding opportunity, innovation, and economic growth.

Once students enroll in college, many are faced with a quick dose of reality when they see a list of remedial courses on their schedule. "For far too many college freshmen around the country, the jubilation of a high school diploma turns to regret when they are confronted with a freshman schedule that includes material they should have learned in high school," Wise wrote in his Lumina blog posting. "According to the National Center for Education statistics, approximately 28 percent of entering college freshmen had to take remedial courses in reading, writing, or math in fall 2000; at two-year public colleges, nearly half (42 percent) of incoming freshmen had to take at least one remedial course."

To prevent this, Wise suggests that all high school freshmen "should have access to a rigorous high school curriculum and a clear plan that assesses their needs and identifies courses that they need to graduate high school prepared for postsecondary education." The plan would include annual follow-up meetings to make sure students remain on track and to provide an opportunity for them to catch up through extra help, academic enrichment, and other supports.

Wise's complete blog entry is available at <http://www.collegecosts.info/2005/10/24/time-travel-and-other-ways-to-reduce-college-costs/>.

The College Board reports, *Trends in College Pricing* and *Trends in Student Aid*, are available at <http://www.collegeboard.com/press/article/0,3183,48884,00.html>.

Lumina Foundation to Hold Summit on College Costs

On November 2, the Lumina Foundation for Education, in collaboration with the James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy, will host "College Costs: Making Opportunity Affordable," a national summit on developing and implementing higher education policies and practices that can lower the cost of higher education.

Speakers representing federal and state policymakers as well as the business community and higher education officials will be featured. **Thomas L. Friedman, columnist for the *New York Times*** and author of the highly acclaimed *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, will be the luncheon speaker.

The summit is presented in collaboration with more than fifty organizations representing higher and K-12 education, business and philanthropy, government, and students and families.

More information on the conference, as well as a complete list of speakers, is available at <http://www.luminafoundation.org>.

Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress 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 secondary school students to achieve high standards



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

1201 Connecticut Ave., NW
Suite 901
Washington, DC 20036

Phone 202 828-0828
Fax 202 828-0821
Alliance@all4ed.org
www.all4ed.org

StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress

Volume 5 No. 20: October 31, 2005

Bob Wise
President

Jason Amos
Editor

P R S R T
First Class Mail
U.S Postage
PAID
Permit No. 534
Woodbridge, VA

Volume 5 No. 20: October 31, 2005

In this issue:

- Senate Passes 2005 Education Spending Bill: Striving Readers Slated to Receive a \$10 Million Increase
- Nation's Report Card Shows Need for Improvement: Eighth-Grade Reading Scores Continue to Decline
- Focus on Adolescent Literacy Needed at State and School Levels: Three New Reports Call for Literacy Instruction in Higher Grades
- College Costs Continue to Rise: Need for Remedial Courses Mean Many College Students Must Pay Top Dollar for High School–Level Material



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

<http://www.all4ed.org>