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Public Education Policy And Progress



SECRETARY SPELLINGS DEFENDS BUSH BUDGET ON CAPITOL HILL: Congress Expresses Concern over Education Cuts, Proposal to Extend NCLB to High Schools

In a March 2 appearance before a Senate appropriations subcommittee, and a March 10 appearance before a House appropriations subcommittee, **U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings** urged support for President Bush's plan to extend the accountability and high expectations of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) into high schools, while defending the president's budget for its fiscal discipline and targeted resources. For fiscal year 2006, President Bush proposed a cut of \$600 million, or 0.9 percent less than was appropriated last year, for the U.S. Department of Education—the first overall cut to the education budget in a decade.

“In his February 2nd State of the Union Address, the president underscored the need to restrain spending in order to sustain our economic growth and prosperity,” Spellings testified. She noted that of the 150 program reductions in the 2006 budget, one-third are under the Department of Education. “We are committed to working with Congress to achieve these savings,” she said. “Given fiscal realities, we must target our resources toward flexibility and results.”

Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA), chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, took issue with the president's proposal to cut education spending by almost 1 percent. “Education is a capital asset, a capital expenditure, and there is no more important investment our government makes,” he said. “When we return to our constituents, we will have some tough questions to face.” Specter also requested details on the forty-eight education programs that were proposed for elimination in the president's budget. He explained that Congress had funded them because they had strong support and met expressed needs in states and localities.

In noting that only sixty-eight out of every one hundred entering ninth graders will receive their high school diploma on time, Spellings praised the president's \$1.24 billion High School Initiative, saying it would help give students the academic skills to succeed in the twenty-first century. “Call it what you will—a challenge, a problem, or a crisis. But it is imperative that we give our high schools the tools to succeed in an economy in which 80 percent of the fastest-growing jobs will require some postsecondary education.”

Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), the ranking Democrat on the committee, noted that the president's budget eliminated \$2.2 billion in funds for high school programs and only proposed \$1.5 billion to replace it. He also noted that parents and teachers feel that NCLB is too harsh and

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results in too narrow a curriculum. He suggested that now is not the right time to extend NCLB to high schools. While Harkin praised the administration for its increases in the special education budget, he noted that the federal government still fell far short of its promise to provide 40 percent of the average per-pupil expenditure to each disabled child in the system.

Among specific programs slated for elimination, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education program and the TRIO programs received wide support from senators. To demonstrate the need for Perkins funds in his state, **Senator Herb Kohl (D-WI)** explained that students in Wisconsin technical schools, whose average age is twenty-nine, would not be served by the High School Initiative, and that current Perkins funding is being used well.

Spellings countered by saying that Perkins recipients would be covered under a new \$250 million community college program in the Labor Department. Kohl, however, remained unconvinced. "Perkins is \$1.3 billion. You're talking about \$200 or \$300 million. I don't think that's a tradeoff. I think there's clearly a net minus of money here of significant proportions," he said.

In discussing the programs slated for elimination, Secretary Spellings explained that most of the programs were small in nature and could continue to receive funding if local districts so choose. "We believe we should be clear about what we expect and allow states to be flexible with their resources," she said. In response, Senator Harkin expressed doubt that local districts would continue to fund programs such as TRIO, which often have only a few students in each school. "I really don't think it's fair to say local districts will pick this up; they won't," he said.

In the hearing before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education, **Chairman Ralph Regula (R-OH)** told Secretary Spellings that he had four goals for the subcommittee: 1) To make sure every child had a highly qualified teacher and a highly qualified principal; 2) To make sure every child learns to read well; 3) To reduce the drop out rate (32 out of 100 being too high); and 4) To increase the emphasis on math and science education.

During the hearing, members of the subcommittee expressed skepticism that the president's High School Initiative could make up for cuts to vocational education, student loans, and other smaller, but targeted programs. **Ranking Member David Obey (D-WI)** charged that the administration's budget was indifferent to the needs of those in the nation who need help the most in order to give tax breaks to the wealthy. He said the budget was outrageously irresponsible and that he strongly disagreed with the policies it represents.

Chairman Regula ended the hearing by telling Secretary Spellings that he hopes to schedule a second meeting for her before the subcommittee, given the strong interest in education.

Secretary Spellings's testimony is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2005/03/03022005.html>.

House and Senate Education Committees Approve Reauthorization of Vocational Education Law

On opposite sides of Capitol Hill last Wednesday, the House and Senate Education Committees each approved its own version of legislation to reauthorize the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act (Perkins). Both versions seek to increase accountability while focusing on academic instruction and improving alignment and coordination between high school and college requirements.

In his fiscal year 2006 budget, President Bush sought to eliminate funding for the \$1.3 billion program and use it for his High School Initiative. Judging by its action last week and member comments during the markups, Congress does not appear willing to go along with the president's plan to eliminate the program.

"Vocational and technical education is a fundamental part of our efforts to improve education at all levels so America can continue to be competitive as our education and workplace systems evolve," said **Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Boehner (R-OH)**.

Boehner's counterpart in the Senate agreed: "The American economy is in the midst of a skills revolution, making a quality education more important than ever," said **Senator Mike Enzi (R-WY), chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee**. "Some estimates suggest that 60 percent of the jobs created in the next decade will require skills that only 20 percent of workers today possess. The Perkins Act is a critical piece of a comprehensive effort to train American workers to fill the good jobs being created."



UNDER RECONSTRUCTION: Spellings Proposes Re-Organization of the U.S. Department of Education

In a new restructuring plan underway at the U.S. Department of Education, all elementary and secondary education programs would be administered by the Office of Deputy Secretary and all postsecondary programs and initiatives, including student aid, will fall under the control of the Office of the Under Secretary. U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings offered details on the reshuffling in a March 4 memo to Education Department employees.

"Today I am pleased to announce a new coordinating structure that focuses the resources of the Department on the people we primarily serve and aligns our leadership with the results we all seek in education excellence in K-12 education and postsecondary education," the memo read. "The new structure sets a high priority on clarification of roles, responsibilities, processes, and the key integration that needs to occur between policy department, program implementation, and communication."

Under the reorganization, the Office of Deputy Secretary will focus on K-12 policy, which includes the No Child Left Behind Act, the president's new High School Initiative, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Under the previous structure, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education administered programs and initiatives that focused on high schools.

"We're going to put the 'secondary' back in the [Office of Elementary and Secondary Education]," said **David Dunn, Secretary Spellings's chief of staff**, in a telephone press conference. "We are really going to try to align the organizational structure with the key, critical missions of the U.S. Department of Education," he said.

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The Office of Under Secretary will focus on higher education and adult education policy under the restructuring and be responsible for postsecondary policy, college aid, and the president's proposed financial aid reforms for the Pell Grant program.

Spellings also proposed creating two new offices to be led by assistant secretaries, who would be confirmed by the U.S. Senate and then report directly to Spellings. The Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, would supervise the budget service, strategic accountability service, and the policy and program studies service. The Office of Communications and Outreach, would bring together the current Office of Public Affairs, the Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs, and communications functions from all program offices.

In her memo, Spellings anticipated that the process will be conducted at a "constructively aggressive pace in the coming weeks." She continued, "Some of the changes will progress quickly whereas other changes involving movement of functions from one Principal Office to another will take longer." During the transition, **Edward R. "Ted" McPherson, the current undersecretary of education**, will shift to a senior advisor position to oversee the restructuring.

U.S. Department of Education Now Accepting Applications for GEAR UP Grants

The U.S. Department of Education is now accepting grant applications for funds available under the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). The GEAR UP program is designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

GEAR UP provides five-year grants to states and partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools. Grantees serve an entire cohort of students beginning no later than the seventh grade and follow the cohort through high school. Funds can also be used to provide college scholarships to low-income students.

GEAR UP employs partnerships committed to serving and accelerating the academic achievement of cohorts of students through their high school graduation. GEAR UP partnerships supplement (not supplant) existing reform efforts, offer services that promote academic preparation and the understanding of necessary costs to attend college, provide professional development, and continuously build capacity so that projects can be sustained beyond the term of the grant.

For fiscal year 2005, \$113.2 million is available for approximately 226 new partnership grants. Partnership grants are competitive six-year matching grants that support early intervention programs designed to increase college attendance and success and raise the expectations of low-income students. An additional \$74.3 million is available for twenty-six state grants. State GEAR UP grants are competitive six-year matching grants that must include both an early intervention component and a scholarship component.

For fiscal year 2006, President Bush proposed to eliminate funding for the GEAR UP program, one of the few programs to receive an "adequate" rating from the U.S. Department of Education's program rating tool. According to the Bush administration, "no definitive data exists on GEAR UP's capacity to achieve its long-term performance goals."

More information, including grant applications, is available at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/gearup/applicant.html>.



NOT A MOMENT TO LOSE: Denver Commission on Secondary School Reform Stresses “Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships” as the Keys to Successful High Schools

In addressing the current reality in high schools in Denver, Colorado, a new report has found “pockets of excellence” but an overall situation that demands the state board of education’s immediate attention. The report, *Not a Moment to Lose: A Call to Action for Transforming Denver’s High Schools*, centers its recommendations around three guiding principles for reform which emphasize academic rigor, educational relevance, and nurturing relationships.

“We envision that Denver’s public high schools will offer the best educational choices for students and their families,” the report reads. “Every student who enters a Denver high school can and will graduate having mastered rigorous and relevant learning in an environment that fosters strong, positive relationships. All high schools will be of high quality.”

Sadly, the commission found that the current state of Denver’s high schools is a far cry from its vision:

Today’s high school structure does not consistently support student learning. In fact, it hampers students and staff from achieving their goals. Class schedules move students from one subject to another with little connection between them or time for rigorous, meaningful learning. Teachers have limited opportunities to work and plan together or give students individual attention. While the demographics of Denver’s students and the options available to them outside of school have changed, the structure of the system and our high schools has not.

According to the report, in 2003 only 71 percent of Denver’s high school seniors graduated. However, the commission noted that while 71 percent is the “official” graduation rate as reported by the state, other calculations show overall graduation rates as low as 48 percent, with 36 percent for Latino students, 48 percent for black students, and 63 percent for white students. In addition to dismal graduation rates, Denver’s high school students also suffer from low reading and math scores. In reading, only 38 percent of ninth graders and 39 percent of tenth graders scored at a “proficient” level. In math, only 11 percent of ninth graders and 10 percent of tenth graders were proficient. In examining college readiness, the commission found that only 30 percent of eleventh graders passed the Colorado ACT with a score above 20, the score that indicates that a student “will have the necessary skills to succeed in college without remediation.”

The commission found that Denver high schools must become “learning organizations where adults and students collaborate to achieve academic excellence and continuously improve their performance.” In order to turn around its high schools and provide its students with the opportunity and skills they need to be successful after graduation, Denver needs to organize its reforms around three intertwined principles:

- **rigor:** high universal expectations and a rich, challenging learning experience for every student;
- **relevance:** learning experiences that are relevant to students’ lives, interests, and future plans and are aligned with real-world experiences and expectations; and
- **relationships:** a safe, respectful, and caring environment in the city and at every school.

In addition to these three principles, the report offers nine strategies and twenty-five recommendations to help Denver’s public high schools “offer the best educational choices for

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students and their families.” The commission also suggests steps that can be taken to implement its ideas and insists on the need for a “systematic revitalization and redesign of the high school experience and learning opportunities” that the district provides to young people.

Denver Public Schools Superintendent Jerry Wartgow pledged full support from district staff in the reform effort. “The dropout rate is too high and the graduation rate is simply too low for anybody who cares about students today to think that the status quo is acceptable,” he said. “The Commission has provided us with a clear vision of where we’re headed and many meaningful ideas for making sure we reach our destination. This is not a quick fix. It will be a sustained effort. But I believe this report will launch meaningful reform that will impact this district positively for years to come.”

In November 2003, voters in Denver approved a mill levy that provided \$2 million annually to be directed to improve secondary education. The Denver Commission on Secondary School Reform was created in April 2004 and charged with providing the state board of education with recommendations on how to best use the money to increase student achievement, close the achievement gap, lower the dropout rate, and increase graduation rates. In preparing its report, the commission investigated high school reform initiatives, evaluated research, best practices, and data, shadowed students at each of Denver’s comprehensive high schools, held a student/teacher forum, commissioned three papers on reform, convened a colloquium of national high school reformers, and spoke extensively with principals, parents, students, teachers, and community members.

The complete report is available at http://www.dpsk12.org/pdf/secondary_reform.pdf.

Is High School as Bad as All That?

Following a recent speech by **Bill Gates, chairman of Microsoft and cofounder of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**, at the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools that declared America’s high schools to be “obsolete,” the *Washington Post* gathered six college students who attended public high schools to assess Gates’s remarks in an online forum.

The students talked about the different career tracks in their high schools, the reasons that caused some of their friends to drop out, and even took on controversial ideas such as rationing a high school education to those students who were willing to earn it. Some of their comments included:

“I remember when one of my career advisers told me of the unspoken tracks at my high school: There was the definitely-going-to-college group, the probably-won’t-go-to-college group, and the group of troublemakers whom they rush through the system without helping.”

“Maybe the answer is to start rationing education in America. Maybe we should start handing a high school education only to those who are willing to earn it. I should have been thrown out of the way so that students who were willing to earn their right to smaller classrooms and better facilities could be rewarded with them.”

“High school is such a tenuous in-between period riddled with the challenges of fitting in, potentially screwing up the rest of your life, and growing up at the same time. That’s really a lot to deal with and I think quite frankly not everyone is willing to stick it out.”

Additional excerpts from the discussion are available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A9098-2005Mar5.html>.



CALL FOR PRESENTERS: Alliance Seeks Presentations on Literacy Interventions for Continuing Breakfast Series

As students, teachers, schools, and districts struggle to meet the goals of NCLB and to better prepare their students for postsecondary education and the workforce, the demand for literacy interventions at the secondary level is increasing. As a result, new programs to reassess literacy levels targeted specifically toward adolescents are emerging to meet the needs of struggling students. It is important for education leaders and advocates to be familiar with these programs and how they can influence the lives of students.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is continuing an ongoing breakfast series exploring interventions in adolescent literacy. The series is driven by criteria that the Alliance has established for decisionmakers when considering literacy programs for older students. The sessions will significantly increase participants' abilities to identify quality criteria for adolescent literacy programs, recognize new and existing programs, use research to critically examine programs, and ask practical questions about implementation and design.

The Alliance invites representatives of literacy intervention programs to apply to present at the breakfast series extending through December 2005. Programs will be selected based on the following criteria:

- **key elements:** the extent to which the model addresses issues of motivation, comprehension instruction, diverse texts, text-based collaborative learning, intensive writing, ongoing assessments, and professional development;
- **age appropriateness:** the extent to which the model relates to students in middle and high schools;
- **applicability:** the extent to which cases and real-life examples clearly illustrate "lessons learned," such as sound, research-based design principles and implementation; and
- **effectiveness:** the extent to which the intervention has proven to raise achievement and, if relevant, increase attendance, decrease discipline problems, and reduce dropout rates.

To learn more about the above criteria, please refer to *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, which can be downloaded at <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/ReadingNext/index.html>.

The Alliance encourages a variety of presenters to apply, including but not limited to school- and districtwide literacy programs, state initiatives, university-based programs, and technical assistance providers in addition to for-profit packaged interventions. Past breakfasts have featured the RAMP UP and Reading Advantage literacy interventions for older students.

To apply, submit a one-page proposal addressing the above selection criteria to Jeremy Ayers at jayers@all4ed.org by **Friday, April 15, 2005**, with the subject line LITERACY PROPOSAL. Questions can be directed to Jeremy by email or by telephone at 202-828-0828. Selections will be announced and presentation schedules will be released on May 2, 2005. Information on past breakfasts, including PowerPoint presentations, is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/index.html>.

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 and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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