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# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **BUDGET IMPASSE CONTINUES IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES: Moderates' Push for Additional Domestic Spending Postpones Budget Vote**

For the last few weeks, many educators have kept tabs on Congress as it works to pass a budget resolution. Although it is a nonbinding spending blueprint that is not signed by the president, the congressional budget resolution sets limits on the spending and tax legislation that Congress will consider for the rest of the year. Only the total amount of discretionary spending in the final budget resolution is binding on the appropriations committees, but if current efforts to add additional funding to the overall spending cap are unsuccessful, some education programs could be squeezed during the appropriations process later in the year. It is for this reason that many education experts see the budget resolution as the first battle in the yearlong fight to obtain as much money as possible for education programs.

Early last week all signs pointed to the U.S. House of Representatives taking up its version of the congressional budget resolution by May 11 or 12. As the week inched forward, however, it became apparent that the House Republican leadership did not have enough support to pass the resolution, even after some accounting measures were used to add more money to domestic priorities such as education and health care.

"I made it very clear I think we need a budget, I want to get a budget, but I don't have the votes for the budget," **House Majority Leader John Boehner (R-OH)** said last week. After talks broke down on Thursday afternoon, Boehner declined to speculate on exactly when the measure could reach the House floor but said "the sooner the better."

In an effort to garner additional support from Republican moderates, **House Appropriations Committee Chairman Jerry Lewis (R-CA)** agreed to shift \$4.1 billion in increases for defense and foreign aid to programs funded in the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education spending bill. However, many House moderates, including **Representative Michael Castle (R-DE)**, continue to hold out for an increase of \$7 billion, the amount that the Senate included in its version of the budget resolution when it agreed to an amendment by **Senators Arlen Specter (R-PA) and Tom Harkin (D-IA)**.

"We just haven't gotten to a point of agreement," Castle said, following a series of meetings with House Republican leadership. "I have to give leadership credit, we have not had discussions like this often." Castle added that he expected negotiations to continue into the week of May 15.

Even without a budget resolution in place, the House Appropriations Committee has already begun work on the fiscal year (FY) 2007 appropriations bills. On May 9, the committee agreed to an overall FY 2007 discretionary spending limit of \$872.8 billion, an amount equal to President

## **Budget Impasse Continues in the House of Representatives** (Continued from p. 1)

Bush's budget proposal. At the same time, the committee approved a \$141.9 billion discretionary allocation for the Labor-HHS-Education spending bill, which is \$4.1 billion higher than the President's request, but only slightly above the \$141.1 billion allocated for FY 2006.

**Representative David Obey (D-WI), the Ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee**, offered an amendment that would have provided an additional \$4.7 billion for the Labor-HHS-Education spending bill, but it was defeated by a party-line vote of 25 to 37.

While Chairman Lewis has declared his intent to pass all of the spending bills before July 4 to "avoid a massive omnibus budget package," **Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN)** is unlikely to schedule consideration of the FY 2007 appropriations bills until after the Independence Day recess. If Congress follows recent precedent, most spending decisions will be put off until after the November elections.

While the House and Senate can work without a budget resolution in place, negotiations on different versions of appropriations bills could prove difficult, especially as the Senate is on record in support of an \$882 billion discretionary spending cap, or \$9.2 billion more than supported by the House and President Bush.

### **Congress Passes \$70 Billion Tax Cut Package**

On May 12, Congress gave final approval on a \$70 billion tax package that would extend President Bush's 2003 tax cut on dividends and capital gains by 2 years, until 2010. The measure would also keep millions of Americans from becoming subject to the alternative minimum tax and provide a multitude of other benefits.

"Let me make it perfectly clear: This legislation is good news for working Americans and for the economy of this country," said **Senator Trent Lott (R-MS)**.

However, according to the Tax Policy Center, a joint venture of the Brookings Institution and the Urban Institute, the middle 20% of earners will see an average tax cut of only \$20. Meanwhile, the wealthiest Americans will receive the lion's share of the cut, with the top 1% of earners receiving \$14,100 in tax reductions and individuals earning over \$1 million receiving \$43,000. In total, about 87% of the tax benefits will go to the 14% of households with incomes above \$100,000.

Republicans counter by saying that the tax cuts pay for themselves and help to grow the economy. They point to tax receipts that have surged to \$1.35 trillion through April, an increase of \$137 billion, or 11.2%, over last year. However, even with the additional tax revenue, tax policy experts argue that the current tax code is not sustainable. According to **University of Michigan tax economist Joel B. Slemrod**, the imbalance between tax collections and federal expenditures has flipped from a surplus to a deficit over the past 6 years. In 2000, federal revenues were \$2.03 trillion, compared to \$1.79 trillion in spending. This year, revenues are expected to reach \$2.31 trillion while spending will hit \$2.65 trillion, a deficit of \$340 billion.

House Majority Leader Boehner has said that holding the line on spending while allowing tax cuts to stimulate the economy will help to close the gap. Some analysts disagree and say that the spending problem is not with discretionary programs such as education and health care, but with entitlement programs such as Medicare and Social Security, which are projected to grow by 23% through 2010.

"The economy has been fairly strong over the last few years, and that makes it harder to make the case that, in the short run, tax cuts inevitably lead to tax increases or spending cuts," Slemrod told the *Washington Post*. "But I don't think anybody disagrees that there are very large fiscal imbalances in the government. It's very clear we've made no progress. In fact, we've made the problem worse."



## **SUCCESS IN THE MIDDLE: New Report Says that a National Policy for Middle Grades is Lacking, Outlines Specific Steps to Improve Middle School Education**

Unless the United States takes action now to improve support for middle-grades schools, millions of young adolescents will be unable to compete in high school and beyond. So says *Success in the Middle: A Policymaker's Guide to Achieving Quality Middle Level Education*, a new report from the National Middle School Association (NMSA). It faults a missing national middle school policy for the fact that too many middle school students do not benefit from challenging and engaging instruction, well-prepared teachers and principals, and other necessary supports.

“The United States still does not have a cohesive national policy for the middle grades, which represent one third of a student’s K–12 education,” said **Sue Swaim, NMSA executive director**. “While policymakers have recently focused on important high school reform, they have skipped over critical middle level reform, which is the gateway to successfully achieving high-performing schools at both the middle and high school levels.”

Even though children in their early adolescent years experience faster growth than in any but their first 3 years of their lives, the report says that the nation’s education policy has largely ignored the middle grades and has focused almost exclusively on the early grades. It notes that the middle grades are when many students make the decisions that will affect them in high school and for the rest of their lives. For example, many students will decide whether they intend to drop out or persist through graduation, or whether to take algebra and other “gatekeeper” courses that predict success in college.

Currently, little federal support is available to students in the middle grades to help them make informed, smart choices as they contemplate these important decisions. The report notes that only 15% of Title I funding goes to middle and high schools. In addition, promising programs such as GEAR UP and TRIO, which help disadvantaged middle school students prepare for college, only reach about 10%–20% of students who are eligible for assistance.

To help ensure that students have all of the resources and support that they need, the report outlines five recommendations that policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels can take.

1. Ensure that all middle level students participate in challenging, standards-based curricula and engaging instruction, and that their progress is measured by appropriate assessments, resulting in continual learning and high achievement.
2. Support the recruitment and hiring of teachers and administrators who have strong content knowledge and the ability to use research-based instructional strategies and assessment practices appropriate for middle level students.
3. Support organizational structures and a school culture of high expectations that enable both middle level students and educators to succeed.
4. Develop ongoing family and community partnerships to provide a supportive and enriched learning environment for every middle level student.
5. Facilitate the generation, dissemination, and application of research needed to identify and implement effective practices leading to continual student learning and high academic achievement at the middle level.

## Success in the Middle (Continued from p. 3)

Within each of these recommendations, the report suggests specific steps that policymakers can take to transform middle school education and give every young adolescent the opportunity to achieve the highest standards. Among its recommendations at the federal level are a call to strengthen the definition of highly qualified middle level teachers to require a “strong content background” in two subject areas and a “solid understanding of instructional strategies and assessment practices appropriate for young adolescents.” The report calls for a federal incentive to encourage states and school districts to create small learning communities and calls on the federal government to “recognize middle schools in statutes and regulations as distinct from elementary or secondary schools.”

The complete report is available at  
<http://www.nmsa.org/Advocacy/PolicyGuide/tabid/784/Default.aspx>.



### **READY FOR COLLEGE AND READY FOR WORK: Report Finds that All High School Students Need Rigorous Curriculum, Regardless of Their Post-Graduation Plans**

High school graduates planning to enter the workforce need academic skills similar to those needed by students planning to enter college. So says *Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?*, a new policy brief from ACT that attempts to blunt the argument that students who plan to go to college need a more rigorous course load than students who expect to go directly into the workforce after high school graduation.

“We can’t afford to have one expectation for students who plan to attend college and another for those who plan to enter the workforce or workforce training programs after high school,” said **ACT CEO Richard L. Ferguson**. “If we educate some students to a lesser standard than others, we narrow their options to jobs that, in today’s economy, no longer pay well enough to support a family.”

In the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century, employers seek entry-level workers who have the same knowledge and skills as college-going students, the report finds. Without these skills, graduates are likely to have difficulty finding a job that pays well enough to sustain a family of four. “Widening access to the American dream through public education has always been one of the foundations of our society, and it is more critical than ever to our ability to remain competitive in today’s global economy,” the report reads.

To determine what constitutes workforce readiness, ACT used data from a comprehensive national database of job and worker attributes that was developed for the U.S. Department of Labor. Within the database, each job is classified into one of five zones depending on the types of education, training, and experience it requires. The report focused on jobs in Zone 3 because they were likely to offer a “wage sufficient to support a small family, provide the potential for career advancement, and projected to increase in the future.” Zone 3 jobs include electricians, construction workers, and plumbers and are the highest zone to not require a bachelor’s degree, but they often require a combination of vocational training and on-the-job experience.

ACT then determined the levels of reading and math skills that were needed to qualify for one of these jobs and compared them to the College Readiness Benchmarks on its ACT college admission and placement exam. The benchmark score on the ACT reflects the score that students need to earn to have a 75% or greater chance of obtaining a course grade of C or better in that subject when in college. For reading, the benchmark score is 21; for math, it is 22. To be considered prepared for the workforce, students would need to score between 19 and 23 on the ACT in math and in reading, a comparable range to the score students need to be considered college-ready. Given this similarity, the report concludes that graduates entering the workforce need the same preparation as those going to college.

“In today’s increasingly technological society, more and more jobs that offer the potential for good wages and future growth are requiring at least some type of training or education beyond high school,” said Ferguson. “Students who graduate from high school without the skills they need for college are also likely to lack the skills they need to successfully complete job training programs.”

To ensure that every student is adequately prepared, the report says that all high school students, regardless of their post-graduation plans, should take a rigorous core preparatory course load in high school. Among its other recommendations are state standards that reflect the skills needed for college and workforce readiness, and a measurement of student progress with aligned assessments beginning as early as eighth grade to monitor progress and to make the appropriate interventions.

The complete policy brief is available at <http://www.act.org/path/policy/pdf/ReadinessBrief.pdf>.

### **ACT Requesting Feedback on Framework for 2011 NAEP in Writing**

ACT, working under the direction of the National Assessment Governing Board, is developing a new writing framework for the U.S. Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for 2011 and beyond. The framework will reflect current best practices in writing instruction and assessment and begin a new trend line that will be the basis for the assessment through the early 2020s. In addition, the 2011 NAEP in Writing will be designed to assess 12th-grade students’ preparedness for writing expectations in college, in the workplace, and in the military.

ACT is seeking comments on initial recommendations for the content and design of the new framework. The preliminary recommendations are available online for review and feedback at <http://www.act.org/naepwriting>. More information, as well as additional instructions on how to offer comments, can also be found on the site. The deadline for comments is May 26.



### **MEETING FIVE CRITICAL CHALLENGES OF HIGH SCHOOL REFORM: Report Examines Proven Methods to Turn Around Low-Performing High Schools**

Based on its evaluations of three comprehensive high school reform initiatives, a new report from MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization, offers research-based solutions to the challenges associated with low-performing high schools. The report, *Meeting Five Critical Challenges of High School Reform: Lessons from Research on Three Reform Models*, is especially valuable to policymakers and practitioners who would prefer to adopt components of comprehensive reform initiatives, such as small learning communities or a

## ***Meeting Five Critical Challenges of High School Reform***

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double-blocked class schedule, to close gaps in their current reform strategies. Regardless the audience, the report offers evidence about proven methods to increase attendance, raise academic achievement, and encourage persistence through graduation while improving postsecondary and labor market outcomes.

“Whether districts and schools adopt a comprehensive reform initiative like the ones MDRC studied or put together the elements of a comprehensive intervention on their own, much has been learned about what is needed—and what seems to work,” noted **report author Janet Quint, senior research associate at MDRC**. “What remains is to make sure that practitioners have the support they need to put that learning into practice.”

The report bases its conclusions on past examinations of the Career Academies, First Things First, and Talent Development interventions. Together, these three models are in place in more than 2,500 high schools across the country, and some of their components have been implemented in thousands more.

Among its findings, the report notes that a positive school climate—one in which “students and adults know each other well and in which adults express care and concern for students’ well-being, intellectual growth, and educational success”—is a key element to student success. It finds that small learning communities make students feel known and cared about by their teachers. However, it cautions that implementing small learning communities will not, in and of itself, increase student achievement.

Other successful practices include Talent Development’s double-blocked class schedule and summer-long, intensive “catch-up” courses that are designed to help students who enter high schools poorly prepared to succeed. Because these courses allow students to earn credits at a faster rate than their classmates will, students can develop the skills that they lacked upon entering eighth grade without falling further behind their classmates.

The MDRC report also offers advice for improving instructional content in schools with teachers who are often less experienced and less knowledgeable about the subjects they teach than their colleagues in more affluent areas. It also examines how to best prepare students for life after high school. For example, the report finds that young men in Career Academies earned over \$10,000 more than members of a control group in the 4 years after high school graduation. However, it also finds that students in Career Academies were not more likely to enroll in postsecondary education and says that improving the academic content of Career Academies could help raise students’ standardized test scores and help them secure admission to college.

The report concludes by saying that structural changes to improve personalization and instructional improvement are the “twin pillars of high school reform.” It adds that students who enter ninth grade “facing substantial academic deficits” can catch up if they are singled out for support.

The complete report is available at <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/428/overview.html>.



## **TROUBLES BOIL OVER IN CHICAGO HIGH SCHOOL: Infusion of New Students Leads to Gang Warfare and Violence in the Hallways**

An article in the May 8 *Chicago Tribune* profiles the difficulties that students have encountered as Chicago officials began shutting down low-performing neighborhood schools and moving students to nearby campuses as part of Renaissance 2010 reforms. The article provides an in-depth look at Clemente High School and shows examples of some of the turbulence that accompanies the usual difficulties in reforming high schools.

The atmosphere at Clemente High School, which is largely Latino, became especially difficult when the city began phasing out Austin High School, which is largely African American, and is sending those students to Clemente. Even before students from Austin arrived at Clemente, tensions were high between the Mexican and Puerto Rican students. However, in early October, gang warfare erupted. According to the article, “School officials, security guards, and students say that the Gangster Disciples from Austin warred with the Latino Vice Lords and Lovers for control of the school. Students were jumped outside the school as they exited for fire drills. Fistfights broke out in the hallways.”

The article notes that the problems at Clemente mirror the rest of the school system where more than 85% of the system’s African-American students attend schools that are overwhelmingly African American, and 80% of Latino students go to schools that are mainly Latino.

“When you go to somewhere new, like to a party, the hostess should make you feel comfortable and welcome,” Camille Vargas, a junior of Puerto Rican and African-American descent told the *Tribune*. “But the Austin kids just came here and the administration didn’t tell us they were coming, and nobody made them feel welcome. Everybody just left it up to us to figure out how to get along. Maybe that was a mistake.”

In the article, **David Pickens, who oversees school closings for the Chicago Public Schools (CPS)**, agreed that the district could have done a better job helping high schools with the transitions, but said CPS was better prepared for next year. The district has set aside \$1 million to assist schools absorbing new students and plans to cap the number of transfers it will allow.

The complete article is available at  
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-0605080144may08,1,7557067.story>.

More information on Renaissance 2010 is available at <http://www.ren2010.cps.k12.il.us/>.

***Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress*** is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both 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. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America’s secondary school students to achieve high standards.



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