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HOUSE COMMITTEE PASSES BUDGET PLAN: Education Spending Would Be Cut by More Than \$5 Billion

On March 29, the U.S. House of Representatives' Budget Committee approved a budget resolution that would cap overall discretionary spending at \$873 billion, the level requested by President Bush in his budget recommendations earlier this year. The committee, which is dominated by conservatives, approved the budget plan by a party-line vote of 22–17.

In his opening statement, **House Budget Committee Chairman Jim Nussle (R-IA)** talked at length about his priorities for fiscal year 2007. Among them, he named “strength” (which he associated with the nation’s defense, homeland security, economy, and job market), “spending control,” “further restraining non-security discretionary spending,” and “reform” (which would address how federal-government dollars are actually spent).

Given that description of priorities, it is not surprising to learn that the plan the House Budget Committee adopted includes a 7% increase in the core defense budget (which does not include Iraq war costs), but cuts domestic programs such as education, health research, and agriculture. Specifically, the budget plan would cut federal spending on education by more than \$5 billion—more than double the cut requested by the president’s budget—for fiscal year 2007.

“Although many seem to regularly forget, the federal government simply doesn’t have an infinite supply of money—nor should it,” Nussle said. “So when we decide to increase spending in an area we’ve determined a top priority, we’ve got to then reduce spending somewhere else. That’s what budgeting is all about.”

Nussle’s plan also includes \$226 billion in additional tax cuts over 5 years. Most of this total would go toward extending the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts, most of which are set to expire in 2010.

In his opening statement, **Representative John Spratt Jr. (D-SC), the committee’s top Democrat**, noted that the budget resolution, if carried out, would add more to the deficit than if Congress did nothing. He said that proposed cuts to domestic programs would “barely make a dent in the budget,” but would hurt the people who benefit from the programs. Referring to education programs as a “key example,” Spratt said, “Surely this is not the time in our country’s history to skimp on the education of our children ... they’ve never needed a good education more than now, when we’re thrusting our whole workforce into the global economy.”

By a party-line vote of 22–14, the committee rejected an amendment by **Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT)** that would have provided an additional \$7 billion for the Departments of

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Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services. The amendment was identical to the one offered by **Senators Arlen Specter (R-PA)** and **Tom Harkin (D-IA)** that was adopted earlier this month on the Senate floor by a vote of 73–27.

Republican Moderates to Push for Additional Spending During House Debate

The full membership of the U.S. House of Representatives is expected to debate the budget resolution the week of April 3. However, the Republican leadership has decided not to allow individual amendments to the resolution and will only permit complete substitute budget resolution proposals.

On March 28, **Representative Mike Castle (R-DE)** held a standing-room-only rally with health and education advocates to demand additional funding for domestic discretionary programs in the House budget resolution. Castle planned to attempt to amend the budget resolution on the House floor to include the \$7 billion the Senate added when it passed the Specter/Harkin amendment. Unless the budget resolution contains the additional spending, Castle has publicly announced that he will vote against it and encourage other moderates to do the same.

“Over the past several years I have become increasingly concerned about the choices we are making,” Castle said. “Instead of closing tax loopholes and addressing corporate welfare, we too often look to eliminate the programs that are utilized by the neediest among us. We continue to fund the war with emergency spending and turn a blind eye to the waste in the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security. We continue to show restraint in only 16% of the federal budget, and only in domestic programs.”

In addition to Castle’s efforts, 23 moderates signed a letter authored by **Representatives Fred Upton (R-MI)** and **Nancy Johnson (R-CT)** 2 weeks ago that urged a 2% increase in domestic discretionary programs and warned that they “would have strong reservations voting for any budget that would result in real cuts in a number of programs.”

The potential showdown between Republican conservatives eager to limit spending and moderates who want additional funding for education and other domestic priorities could complicate the floor debate on the budget resolution. With no House Democrats expected to support the resolution, Republican unity is especially important to the resolution’s passage.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AWARDS EIGHT STRIVING READERS GRANTS

The suspense is over: the U.S. Department of Education has finally announced the eight recipients of Striving Readers grants for the 2006–07 school year. While the official announcement did not come until March 22, the awards had been made public individually through announcement events and press statements issued in the eight locales over the last few weeks.

“We know absolutely that students who cannot read well and read proficiently throughout their schooling are at risk of becoming disengaged, disaffected, and falling behind in their studies,”

said **U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings** at a March 16 appearance with **First Lady Laura Bush**, announcing the Newark Public Schools' Striving Readers grant. "The Striving Readers grants help more students get the skills they need to succeed in college and the workforce and in life."

The grants, which will be funded over a 5-year period, range from \$14 million to \$24.5 million and will support the implementation of eight Striving Readers programs across the country. Each program will focus on middle and/or high schools with significant numbers of struggling readers, and each includes a rigorous evaluation component, to be conducted by independent researchers.

The eight grantees will use a variety of interventions, such as Read 180 and the Strategic Instruction Model, within several different traditional and nontraditional settings. For example, the Ohio Department of Youth Services will use its \$14 million grant to address the literacy needs of students in grades 6–12 within state juvenile correctional facilities. Chicago Public Schools will use its \$24.5 million grant to provide intensive interventions to struggling readers in grades 6–8 within an afterschool setting. The San Diego Unified School District, which received a \$17.5 million grant, plans to implement a program it designed to focus on entering middle or high school students who struggle to read. Its goal is to have students reading at grade level and passing the California High School Exit Exam in grade 10.

The complete list of grantees is:

Grantee	State	Project Name	Grant Amount (over 5 years)
Chicago Public Schools	IL	Chicago Public Schools Striving Readers	\$24,548,234
Danville School District	KY	Kentucky Content Literacy Consortium (KCLC)	\$16,195,959
Memphis City Schools	TN	Memphis Striving Readers	\$16,074,687
Multnomah County [Portland] School District #1	OR	Striving Readers Project	\$23,536,956
Newark Public Schools	NJ	Newark Public Schools Striving Readers	\$13,968,272
Ohio Department of Youth Services	OH	Striving to Achieve in Reading and Re-Entry (StARR)	\$14,018,555
San Diego Unified School District	CA	Strategies for Literacy Independence Across the Curriculum	\$17,574,149
Springfield and Chicopee Public Schools	MA	Springfield-Chicopee Striving Readers Program	\$16,655,483

These initial grants were awarded based on the \$24.8 million first-year funding level that Congress approved for the Striving Readers program for fiscal year 2005 and the increase to \$29.7 million it received in fiscal year 2006. Although these awards are an important first step, this level of funding does not begin to meet the needs of schools and students across the country—demonstrated by the fact that the department, according to Secretary Spellings, received a total of 140 grant applications.

The president's fiscal year 2007 budget requests \$100 million for the Striving Readers program, an increase of \$70.3 million. An additional 60 to 70 Striving Readers intervention awards could be made if that funding level is approved.

U.S. Department of Education Awards Striving Readers Grants (Continued from p. 3)

“As we spend a lot of time and attention on those first three years—first grade through third grade—making sure children have a great start in learning to read, and a great basis, we can’t ignore the children who’ve already made it this far and can’t read,” said Mrs. Bush. “But we know that with stronger reading skills, these students are more likely to graduate, less likely to drop out of school, and more likely to go on to be able to find good jobs.”

Secretary Spellings’s and First Lady Laura Bush’s remarks are available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/03/20060316-5.html>. Additional information on the Striving Readers program and the individual grantees is available on the U.S. Department of Education’s Striving Readers website at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders/index.html>.



RESULTS THAT MATTER: High School Reform Must Focus on More Than Attendance, Graduation, and College Matriculation Rates

Imagine a world in which every high school in the United States managed to keep more students in school and enroll them in more challenging courses. High school graduation rates would rise, and more students would enter—and stay in—college. A perfect world, right? Not according to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, a coalition of businesses and education organizations that advocates for the infusion of 21st-century skills into education. According to their new report, *Results That Matter: 21st Century Skills and High School Reform*, “even if every student in the country satisfied traditional metrics, they still would remain woefully under-prepared for 21st century success beyond high school.”

“High schools must be designed, organized, and managed with a relentless focus on the results that matter in the 21st century—in addition to the traditional metrics of attendance, graduation and college matriculation rates—or they risk missing the mark,” said **John Wilson, chair of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and executive director of the National Education Association**. “Traditional metrics are important, but they are no longer sufficient indicators of student preparedness.”

The report argues that improving high schools must include redefining “rigor” to encompass not just mastery of core academic subjects such as math and science, but also mastery of 21st-century skills and content. It stresses that, in addition to learning academics, students need to know how to continue learning and apply what they learn in effective and innovative ways. Skills, including critical thinking and problem solving, communications, and information and media literacy, will be vital to these efforts.

The report also focuses on emerging content areas that students will need to succeed in the workforce, such as global awareness, financial, economic, business, and entrepreneurial literacy, and health and wellness awareness. It calls for a greater incorporation of life skills, such as leadership, ethics, and accountability. Finally, the report stresses that assessments must measure each of these five elements (core subjects, 21st-century content, learning and thinking skills, information and communications technology, and life skills).

The report acknowledges that today’s high schools fail to serve far too many students—a failure seen in low graduation rates, poor performance on national assessments and international

comparisons, and high college remediation rates. It applauds current efforts to reform high schools, but argues that simply raising low numbers and percentages will not adequately prepare today's students to compete on an international level, where Americans' creativity and innovation no longer set them apart. Instead, it says that "creating high schools that truly will improve learning, achievement, and competencies demands a clear understanding of the knowledge, skills and attributes that are increasingly important for every high school student today."

The complete report is available at http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/documents/P21_report.pdf.

Americans Prefer Community-Wide High School Reform Over Ad Hoc Approach

A majority of Americans believe that the best way to fix the nation's urban high schools is to improve the entire system of high schools within a community or district, rather than one at a time, according to a new survey commissioned by Carnegie Corporation of New York.

While most reform efforts have adopted a one-school-at-a-time approach over the past several years, the findings of the national survey, conducted by Widmeyer Research & Polling as part of Carnegie's Schools for a New Society initiative, revealed that more than two in three adults (68%) want district officials to concentrate on the district as a whole and improve the entire system of high schools in a community, compared to only 26% of survey respondents who favor the individual school revamping approach.

In findings similar to those from a poll released by the Alliance for Excellent Education last year, the Carnegie Corporation survey found that Americans see an urgent need to improve high schools. Survey participants also realize that not all high schools are serving students well, with nearly three in four Americans (73%) saying that at least "some" of the public high schools in their city are failing to educate students properly. According to the poll, Americans want all schools to be as good as the best ones in a community. To reach that goal, 82% of Americans believe that every school within a district should receive the resources and support it needs to offer students a quality education. More than four in five Americans (85%) believe that political, education, and community leaders must work together to eliminate resource inequality among neighboring high schools.

"That really does signal a change in attitude and awareness," said **Connie Warren, senior program director for Carnegie**. "People are starting to understand that education is a community institution that requires multiple partners in the business and civic communities and from grass-roots parents groups."

According to the survey, Americans overwhelmingly want high schools to better prepare students for life after graduation. They want instructional reforms that teach students problem solving, collaborative work skills, and other real-world skills that they need to succeed as adults in the 21st century. The poll also found that 93% of Americans believe that a commitment to vastly improved reading instruction in all high schools should be one of the most important priorities for school districts.

More information on the poll is available at <http://www.carnegie.org/sub/news/onehighschool.html>.



WHATEVER IT TAKES: Report Examines Efforts to Recover and Reconnect Out-of-School Youth

There are more than 6 million 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States without a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate. According to *Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*, a new report from the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), the largest obstacle for reconnecting these individuals to society is not a lack of successful models, but the absence of the moral and political will to properly address this "underrated American dilemma."

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“The nation has more than enough models and know-how to be able to reclaim America’s dropouts,” the report reads. “Unfortunately, in many communities the work of recovery and reconnections has yet to begin in earnest ... Without a widely-held popular conviction that dropouts represent an unacceptable loss of life and opportunity both for young people and the nation, real progress will be difficult to achieve.”

Based on visits to dropout recovery programs in 12 U.S. communities, the report found that efforts to steer dropouts into productive roles in society vary. They occur within traditional public schools, specially created “recovery schools,” alternative learning centers, charter schools, community colleges, and more. Within these programs, the ultimate goals for students are as varied as the learning environments. “Some emphasize preparing young people for employment after first building a foundation in literacy and numeracy,” the report reads. “Others stress education writ large and, from the outset, urge their participants to aim for success in postsecondary education. Still others focus on personal development and preparation for responsible adulthood in all its familial and civic dimensions.”

Given these varied approaches, it is no surprise that the report did not identify “one perfect model or blueprint” for successful dropout recovery. However, it did find several common characteristics of effective dropout recovery throughout the communities studied. The report found that for the most part, dropout recovery and retention programs are very flexible in terms of scheduling and enrollment, with most practicing open-entry/open-exit models that allow students to proceed through the curriculum at their own pace. In addition, curriculum tends to be real-world and career oriented, with an eye toward local employer needs. Successful programs also recognize that many students need income to support themselves and their families and offer financial support in the form of employment opportunities in summer and afterschool hours, or modest stipends for work performed while in training.

The report also found that dropout recovery programs experience few disciplinary problems even though they serve a high percentage of young people who have been involved in juvenile justice systems or expelled from previous schools. In fact, it found that youth in reconnection programs want to learn and succeed, and recognize that they have “wasted much of their young lives and are eager to change.” It notes that most of the programs observed have long waiting lists, well beyond their ability to serve.

Like a survey of high school dropouts released by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation last month, AYPF found that a large majority of out-of-school youth initially fell behind their classmates and dropped out, not because of poor prior schooling or academic performance, but because of social, economic, and psychological barriers. In response, the report recommends that reconnection programs provide access to support services in vital areas such as health and nutrition, teen parenting and child care, transportation, substance abuse treatment, mental health, and English as a second language.

Finally, the report states that “committed adults, steadfast in their support of young people’s success, are the key element of dropout recovery. What they share is an unwavering commitment to putting students at the center. As we often heard from students, these schools and programs

often provide the first occasion for them to feel that anyone cares about their success, the first chance for them to feel valued.”

The report notes that schools have many lessons to learn from successful dropout recovery programs. “When we ask young people who are successfully completing a second-chance recovery program why this program has worked whereas their former high school failed them, they tell us that they no longer feel like a number, that they are now part of a ‘family’ that looks out for them and is genuinely dedicated to their success.”

In addition to the 12 local programs, the report highlights 6 national programs: Job Corps, Jobs for America’s Graduates, National Guard Youth ChalleNGe, Opportunities Industrialization Centers, YouthBuild, and Youth Service and Conservation Corps. While these programs enroll many of the nation’s out-of-school youth, their combined annual enrollment totals only 150,000 at most, or a little more than 2% of the 6.27 million 18- to 24-year-olds who had neither a high school diploma nor a GED in 2000. The report described this low percentage as a “powerful indicator of how poorly our nation is responding to the enormity of the dropout problem and its dire consequences.” It adds that dropout recovery efforts are funded largely by state and local public and private revenues and that support from the federal government, which is shrinking, plays a relatively minor role.

The report cites the U.S. Department of Labor’s Youth Opportunity (YO) Program as an example of lagging federal support. The program, which awarded about \$1 billion to 36 communities over 5 years in May 2000, is now being phased out. While the final evaluation on the YO Program will come from the Department of Labor’s formal review, the report found clear short-run accomplishments for the communities and youth involved. For example, the YO Program had a penetration rate of 42% of all eligible youth and 62% of out-of-school youth and “played a seminal role in the recent dropout prevention and recovery efforts” of nearly 100,000 youth in its 36 communities.

In the end, the report concludes that out-of-school youth are largely forgotten in most circles. “Overall, one cannot avoid the conclusion that the United States gives neither adequate thought nor sufficient resources to the national shame of out-of-school youth,” it reads. “It has become ever-clearer that governments at all levels do not yet regard dropout recovery (as distinct from prevention) as a morally or economically compelling priority worthy of major investment of public monies.” In fact, out-of-school youth represent an “underrated American dilemma that, to an alarming degree, threatens social stability, weakens our economy, and diminishes the lives of millions of fellow Americans—and our own.”

The complete report is available at
<http://www.aypf.org/publications/WhateverItTakes/WITfull.pdf>.

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.



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