



# StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **HOUSE LEADERS UNABLE TO COME TO AGREEMENT ON A BUDGET PLAN: Interparty Fights Postpone Consideration of the Budget Resolution**

Unable to reach a compromise between moderates who sought additional funding for domestic programs, conservatives who wanted to rein in spending even more, and appropriators who opposed new budget rules, the U.S. House of Representatives' Republican leadership decided to postpone consideration of the budget resolution that the House Budget Committee passed on March 29. The House is expected to resume negotiations when it returns from a 2-week recess on April 24.

The newly elected **Republican majority leader, John Boehner (R-OH)**, indicated that the new budget rules, and not moderates' push for more spending, were the major roadblock to passing a budget resolution. "We'll keep working on the budget process reforms—that's the biggest issue standing in the way," he said.

The tough new rules were written by **House Budget Committee Chairman Jim Nussle (R-IA)** and would allow challenges to emergency spending and lawmaker earmarks, which are sometimes referred to as "pork." Recently, emergency spending has gained popularity, as lawmakers have used the designation to circumvent budget caps while paying for "onetime costs," such as the war in Iraq and the rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina. Appropriators, who are vehemently opposed to the new budget rules, portrayed the move as a power grab by the House Budget Committee. "For years the Budget Committee has wanted to be the Appropriations Committee," said **Representative C. W. Bill Young (R-FL), chairman of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee**. "This would be a step towards that. If they are going to do that, they might as well abolish one or the other."

Joining the appropriators in opposing the budget resolution in its current form is **Representative Michael Castle (R-DE)**, a leading House moderate who has said that the budget plan passed by the House Budget Committee is a "nonstarter." Castle and other moderates have told the Republican leadership that they cannot support the budget resolution unless it includes the \$7 billion in additional spending for health and education programs that the Senate included when it agreed to an amendment by **Senators Arlen Specter (R-PA) and Tom Harkin (D-IA)**. "The domestic discretionary number is simply insufficient, and it will be extremely difficult to pass this budget resolution on the House floor," Castle said.

Meanwhile, **Representative Mike Pence (R-IN), chairman of the Republican Study Committee**, continues to say that he and other House conservatives would not support any discretionary spending increases over the \$873 billion cap proposed by President Bush in his budget. "I would rather have no budget than a budget that says to the American people we are going to continue our big-spending ways," said Pence.



## **OPRAH'S ON!: Oprah Winfrey, Bill and Melinda Gates, and More Than 50 Other Partners Announce National Campaign on High School Dropouts**

On April 11 and 12, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* focused its estimated 49 million U.S. viewers' attention on "American Schools in Crisis," a 2-day report on the poor state of America's high schools. During the first show, Bill and Melinda Gates unveiled STAND UP, a national campaign to make the public more aware of the dropout crisis in American high schools and to provide them with the tools to make a difference. The campaign's goal is to ensure that students receive the support they need to graduate from high school ready for college, work, and citizenship.

"We have supported many schools and school districts in their efforts to redesign and create new high schools that ensure all young people graduate prepared for college and success," said **Tom Vander Ark, executive director of education for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**, one of 50-plus foundations, community-based schools, education organizations, and others that have joined the campaign. "But it will take more than these efforts to get the job done. STAND UP seeks to provide all Americans—parents, teachers, community leaders, and others—with information they need to take action so our high schools prepare all young people and our country for a strong future."

According to an article in *Education Daily*, more than 2 million visitors visited the STAND UP website after its launch. "We've had people hitting our site at a rate of 20,000 per second," said **Mike Franzini, president and media director of the nonprofit media-consultant firm Public Interest**, which conceived the campaign. "So we know that we're tapping into something big."

### **Students Trade Places on *Oprah***

On one segment of the first show, Oprah showed the reactions of students from two very different kinds of high schools when they switched places for a day. Students from Harper High School, which is located in a low-income community in Chicago and graduates just 40% of its students, and students from Neuqua Valley High School, a \$65 million facility that graduates 99% of its students, couldn't believe what they saw about how the others were being educated.

At Neuqua Valley, students enjoy an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a gym and fitness center, a huge computer lab, and an award-winning music department. In contrast, students at Harper High must pass through metal detectors when they enter their school building, which does not have enough instruments for a music class—students must rely on improvised instrumentation, like banging on desktops—and the school's swimming pool has not contained water in a decade. "It's so mind-blowing to think that there's such a difference and we're both in the same state, an hour away from each other," one Neuqua Valley student said.

To no one's surprise, the academic performance between students at Harper High School and Neuqua Valley was as different as night and day. At Neuqua Valley, 78% of students met the Illinois reading standards, 76% met the science standards, and 77% met the math standards. At Harper High, only 16% met the reading standards, 1.5% met the science standards, and just 0.5% met the math standards.

After sitting in on a math class at Neuqua Valley, a Harper student questioned whether her education at Harper would prepare her for life after high school. “I was looking at the math problems that they’re doing [at Neuqua Valley], and I’m like, ‘What language is that?’” she said. “As soon as I get to college, I’m going to be lost.”

As part of her shows, Oprah laid out the problem and offered substantive hope for fixing schools. However, she said that the American public needs to take a more active role in demanding better schools and asked individuals—as they think about who they will vote for later this year—to consider what elected officials are doing and saying about this matter. She directed individuals who were concerned about the crisis in America’s high schools to make their voice heard.

“I believe, just as I know all of you watching believe, that every American child deserves the best school,” she said. “If you’ve watched this show today, and you realize that your child is one of the children who is not getting the best that this nation has to offer, or if you are concerned about what’s happening to other kids in this country, go to [StandUp.org](http://StandUp.org).”

### ***Oprah/TIME* Survey Finds Americans Dissatisfied with Public Schools**

*The Oprah Winfrey Show* also teamed up with *TIME* magazine to conduct a poll on Americans’ attitudes on the educational system and on high school dropouts. According to the poll’s results, 55% of Americans are dissatisfied with the public schools in this country, with 61% saying that they think public schools are in a “crisis.” When asked how serious they thought the dropout problem is, 89% of Americans said it was “extremely serious” or “somewhat serious.”

When asked how they would solve the dropout problem, most Americans seemed to favor stronger enforcement measures to keep kids in school. For example, 83% said that making truancy enforcement stronger would be “very effective” or “somewhat effective” at reducing the number of children who skip school without an excuse. When asked at what age a student should be allowed to drop out, 38% said age 18, whereas 26% said that students should never be allowed to drop out. In addition, the poll found that 87% of respondents thought that increasing “parental involvement by offering training to parents on how to keep their children in school” would be “very effective” or “somewhat effective” in fixing the dropout problem.

Respondents thought that states could justifiably deny certain privileges to dropouts. Sixty-five percent said a state should be allowed to deny a student a driver’s license if he or she dropped out of school and is under age 18, and 33% said a state should be allowed to deny individuals a work permit. The poll also found that Americans would put their money where their mouth is when it comes to improving schools—59% of those surveyed said they would be willing to pay higher taxes to improve the public school system.

In addition to the national poll, the April 17 issue of *TIME* also features a cover story on the “Dropout Nation.” It profiles Shelbyville, Indiana, a middle-class town that is located about 30 miles from Indianapolis. Of the 315 Shelbyville students who started ninth grade 4 years ago, only 215 are expected to graduate. As **Shelbyville schools’ Superintendent David Adams** said, “I think [when] the average person thinks dropout, they think urban, they think minority. But that’s just not the case.” In addition to its profile on Shelbyville High, the *TIME* article also

**Oprah's On** (Continued from p. 3)

provides an in-depth look at the nationwide dropout crisis and the repercussions that accompany it.

As Oprah said on both shows, when Bill Gates, the richest man in the world, says he's terrified about the state of American education, it makes her "really, really scared." "I've often said that I believe that education is freedom," she said. "And if it is freedom, indeed, then we are literally imprisoning America's future. We all have to demand more from our local, our state, our national leaders ... and more from ourselves as citizens, because this is a crisis. And this crisis is going to affect every single one of us."

More information on Oprah Winfrey's "American Schools in Crisis" report, including features from the show, the STAND UP campaign, and complete results from the poll, is available at [http://www2.oprah.com/tows/slide/200604/20060411/slide\\_20060411\\_284\\_101.jhtml](http://www2.oprah.com/tows/slide/200604/20060411/slide_20060411_284_101.jhtml).

*TIME* magazine's cover story, "Dropout Nation," is available online at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1181646,00.html>.

### **Alliance Unveils New Web Homepage, "The Crisis in America's High Schools"**

In support of what the Alliance for Excellent Education hopes will be sustained public interest in high school improvement generated by *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *TIME*'s companion cover story on dropouts, the Alliance has created a new section on its website. Called "The Crisis in America's High Schools," the new section provides updated state and local information on high schools, including graduation rates, college readiness rates, and student achievement data. It also features the results from the Alliance's 2005 nationwide survey of Americans' attitudes about high school reform, videos of students talking about high school and literacy, and several reports that address various aspects of the high school dropout crisis while offering policy solutions.

This new feature is available at [http://www.all4ed.org/whats\\_at\\_stake/index2.html](http://www.all4ed.org/whats_at_stake/index2.html).



### **CONVERGENCE: Further Threats to Minority and Low-Income Individuals' Access to Higher Education Possible**

The benefits of additional years of education after high school are well defined. Research has shown that individuals with more education tend to have higher salaries, higher savings, better health, and longer life expectancies. However, a new report cautions that access to postsecondary education could be increasingly denied to low-income, minority, and other traditionally underserved student populations. According to *Convergence: Trends Threatening to Narrow College Opportunity in America*, a new report from the Institute for Higher Education Policy, a series of trends, including reduced financial aid, higher tuition, and fewer early intervention programs, are coming together in a way that could decrease postsecondary educational opportunities to disadvantaged populations.

"Until now, these previously identified trends have been discussed largely in isolation," said **Jamie Merisotis, president of the Institute for Higher Education Policy**. "However, we found that when taken together, the convergence and interaction among them has a much greater impact than each separately might suggest."

Underserved populations are already less likely to enroll in some form of postsecondary education than their middle- and higher income peers. According to the report, 80% of high-income high school completers went to college by the October following graduation, compared to only 53% of low-income students.

The report identifies several trends that, if unchecked, will likely lead to less opportunity for minority and low-income students. It notes that federal, state, and institutional financial aid appears to be shifting toward an increase in merit-based awards, which disproportionately flows to white and more affluent students, and away from need-based aid. For example, it notes that aid based on academic merit grew over 4 times the rate of need-based aid from 1993–94 to 2003–04. At the same time, early intervention and awareness programs that target low-income and first-generation students have been threatened with elimination or budget cuts.

Today, students from all but the wealthiest families are struggling to cope with skyrocketing tuition. According to the report, the maximum Pell Grant—the “foundation of federal need-based aid programs”—covered only 36% of the average price of attendance at a public 4-year institution in 2004–05, down from 42% in 2001–02. As a result, more low-income students are taking on additional debt to pay for their education.

Considering each trend in isolation mutes the collective effect, but as the report notes, the cumulative effect is staggering. In order to preserve postsecondary opportunities for all students, it says that the higher education system will have to change “significantly.” It calls for a partnership of nearly everyone involved in higher education: local, state, and federal lawmakers, students and parents, the private sector, the media, college faculty, leadership at all kinds of institutions, etc.

In its recommendations, the report says that resources should be focused on students who need them the most and would not otherwise be able to attend and complete college. It also says that tuition increases at a state’s public institutions should be limited to that state’s average increase in family income. To offset these sacrifices on the part of postsecondary institutions, the report calls for a “new and prestigious competitive grant” that would provide financial support and recognition to colleges and universities for attempts to accommodate students who have historically not been well served. It would also reward institutions that perform well in attracting and retaining low-income and minority students.

The complete report is available at <http://www.ihep.org/Pubs/PDF/ConvergenceFINAL.pdf>.



**MAKING GOOD ON A PROMISE: New Report Offers Recommendations for Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth**

While there has been growing interest among policymakers and the media about the high school dropout crisis, too little attention has been given to reconnecting dropouts who want to pursue an education and move toward a productive adulthood. So says *Making Good on a Promise: What Policymakers Can Do to Support the Educational Persistence of Dropouts*, a new report from Jobs for the Future (JFF) that examines how far society is from “making good” on the promise of a second chance to high school dropouts.

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“The educational system is failing these young people twice,” said **Marlene B. Seltzer, president and CEO of JFF**. “Too often, schools do not keep them engaged in learning the first time around; then when they try to go back and complete their education the system provides inadequate options. Anyone who demonstrates such persistence ought to have every opportunity to better themselves and contribute something positive to society. And everyone deserves the quality education promised to them.”

Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study, which tracked the educational progress of approximately 25,000 eighth graders in 1988 over 12 years, the report challenges popular stereotypes about dropouts. It finds that dropping out is a “full-fledged epidemic in central cities and other low-income communities.” The report adds that dropouts come from all walks of life and even include about 10% of young people from families in the highest two socioeconomic status levels.

Also challenged is the belief that dropouts are overwhelmingly African American or Hispanic. The report points out that socioeconomic status, not race, is the key indicator in predicting a future dropout. “Black and Hispanic youth are no more likely to drop out of high school than their white peers of similar family income and education,” it reads. In fact, white students from the lowest socioeconomic group, at 41%, are actually *more* likely to drop out than their African-American (30%) or Hispanic classmates (37%) from the same income level. However, dropouts are more of an issue in black and Hispanic communities; whereas Hispanic students make up nearly half of all students in the lowest income quartile (48%), and black students make up 36%; white students only account for 13% of the lowest income quartile.

Similar to reports from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the American Youth Policy Forum, the JFF report found that most dropouts do not lack motivation, but instead they are “remarkably persistent” in their efforts to complete a secondary education. In fact, close to 60% of dropouts eventually earn a high school credential, but only 10% earn a high school diploma. The rest—about 49%—earn their GED. After obtaining a high school credential, roughly half of these students (44%) later enroll in a 2- or 4-year college, but only about 10% ultimately earn a postsecondary degree.

Hoping to increase the numbers of dropouts who persist to postsecondary degrees, the report’s authors offer several recommendations to help dropouts reconnect to the education system and take advantage of their second chance at an education. Because so many students do not follow the traditional pathway of 4 years in high school followed by 2–4 years of postsecondary study, the report calls for new pathways to college, especially for minority students and individuals from low-income communities. “Closing the high school graduation gap between rich and poor, and white and black or Hispanic youth, will mean targeting high school reform activity, new school creation, and other dropout prevention and recovery strategies to schools and districts with high concentrations of low-income students,” the report reads. Specifically, the potential of small schools and charter schools is cited as a central strategy in this effort.

The report calls for a redesign of dropout recovery programs to “build on student aspirations and reflect the demands of the knowledge-based economy.” Currently, most GED programs do not

prepare young people to enroll—and succeed in—postsecondary education. There are exceptions; New York City and Boston have combined various resource streams to help dropouts attain a high school diploma and college degree or certificate that leads them to self-sufficiency. Flexible schedules and curricula are key features of these programs, which help address the family and economic responsibilities of older learners. Community colleges, the report notes, could also act as a “potentially powerful bridge” into the education system or labor market for dropouts. However, they are currently not sufficiently connected to GED and other credentialing programs. The report challenges states to “assess the effectiveness of their GED delivery systems and the extent to which GED delivery programs are linked to postsecondary institutions and credentialing programs.”

The report also makes several recommendations that could be addressed under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). It calls for K–12 education accountability systems to “emphasize a dual agenda” of higher graduation rates and higher academic standards. Currently, NCLB holds states accountable if subgroups of student populations in schools and districts do not regularly improve their achievement levels as a measure of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). This is not true for graduation rates. Under the report’s recommendation, states would shift from an emphasis on test scores alone to an equal consideration of test scores and graduation and dropout rates. “This shift will require states to invest in building data systems that use a uniform four-year cohort graduation rate ... Such an investment will enhance the capacity of states to move students up to higher standards without losing a significant number of them along the way,” it reads.

The complete report is available at <http://www.jff.org>.

### **Save the Date: National Schools to Watch Annual Conference**

On June 22–24, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform will hold its National Schools to Watch Annual Conference. Schools to Watch is a national program that identifies and honors middle schools in an effort to inform others on how to achieve academic success through best practices.

The conference will include education experts, professors, policymakers, and teams from Schools to Watch sites from across the country. It will also provide a forum for sharing real-world success stories as well as planning and reflection sessions that will allow educators in current and future Schools to Watch sites to exchange ideas and proven solutions.

Conference sessions will feature research-based practices from Schools to Watch sites from around the country, current strategies on effective practices to meet Adequate Yearly Progress, tips for creating supportive cultures, and suggestions for advocating on behalf of young adolescents. It will also feature a session for schools interested in becoming a School to Watch.

More information, including registration details and a conference brochure, is available at <http://www.mgforum.org/>.

***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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