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Public Education Policy And Progress



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES PASSES EDUCATION FUNDING BILL: Legislation Draws Veto Threat From President Bush for “Excessive” Spending

On July 19, the House of Representatives passed its version of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2008 Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education appropriations bill. The \$607 billion bill contains \$152 billion in discretionary spending, which includes approximately \$62 billion for the U.S. Department of Education. The bill represents an increase of \$5.5 billion in discretionary spending over FY 2007 and is about \$6 billion more than President Bush had requested.

During debate on the House floor, **Representative David Obey (D-WI), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee**, called the bill a “good bipartisan product” and took the president to task for shortchanging education and health care.

“We cannot disinvest in the country’s future without creating the kind of future that no one wants, but that’s what the administration has been doing for six years now,” Obey said. “This bill targets additional resources to areas where the nation is facing deficits, like the deficits in access to healthcare and education. We can’t erase those deficits in a single year, but we can begin. This bill rejects the arbitrary cuts called for by the president and invests a small portion of the resources that are needed to get us where we want to be, as a nation, in ten years. Instead of spending billions on the war in Iraq and on tax cuts for people making over a million bucks a year, this bill begins to make the long-term investments in areas like healthcare, education, and medical research that will prepare us for the kind of future we all want.”

While acknowledging that some Republicans would have preferred to spend a little less money in the bill, **Representative Jim Walsh (R-NY), the top Republican on the Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee**, praised the bipartisan nature of the negotiations on the bill and was satisfied with the final product. “[T]his bill addresses many of the most critical issues confronting our nation—our families’ health care, our children’s education, our retirement security and our own workplace protection and job training needs,” Walsh said. “If I were chairman, and I had this allocation, I’m not sure I would have written the bill a whole lot differently.”

Although the House of Representatives spent approximately twenty-five hours debating amendments to the bill, very few were approved. One that did pass was offered by **Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)**; it cut \$46.5 million from the beleaguered Reading First program and transferred those funds to the Safe Schools and Citizenship Education program. (Funding for the Reading First program had already been cut by the House

House of Representatives Passes Education Funding Bill

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Appropriations Committee by \$629 million, or 61.1 percent. Investigations into that program have revealed cases of mismanagement and have raised ethical questions.)

Discussing the amendment, Representative Obey suggested that some funding could be restored to the Reading First program later in the appropriations process. “It’s our hope that by the time we get to conference, we will have worked out enough of an understanding with the administration about the corrections that are needed so that we don’t have to take the deep cuts [to Reading First] that are in the bill now,” he said.

Other successful amendments included one by **Representative Mike Ferguson (R-NJ)** that increased special education funding by \$50 million and one by **Representative Vernon Ehlers (R-MI)** that provided an additional \$16 million for a program designed to improve the training of math and science teachers.

Several amendments that would have reduced the overall spending levels in the bill were defeated. For example, amendments by **Representatives John Campbell (R-CA), Jim Jordan (R-OH), Marilyn Musgrave (R-CO), and Tom Price (R-GA)** would have imposed an across-the-board cut ranging from 0.25 percent to 4.6 percent to every program included in the bill.

One Republican not inclined to support the bill in its current form is President Bush, who earlier this year said that he would veto any appropriations bill that had higher spending levels than the amount included in his FY 2008 budget. He renewed that threat as the House was considering the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill, saying that the bill contained an “irresponsible and excessive level of spending.” In a Statement of Administration Policy released on July 17, the president also took issue with the Congress’s cuts to the Reading First program and its failure to fund the Striving Readers program at the level that he requested in his budget. The president’s budget would fund Striving Readers at \$100 million; the House chose to fund the program at \$31.9 million, the same level as last year.

In the end, the bill received a significant amount of support from Republicans, with fifty-three voting for its passage. The final margin was 276–140, with fifteen members not voting. While the margin was significant, it fell short of enough votes to overcome a presidential veto.

Next Steps: Timeline for Senate Debate Remains Unclear

Although the Senate Appropriations Committee passed its version of the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill on June 21, it will not receive consideration on the Senate floor until sometime after the August recess. Given that timeline, some education observers do not think final totals will be available until near the end of the year. “It is going to be a long slog,” as **Edward Kealy, executive director of the Committee for Education Funding**, told *Education Daily*. “We might have snow on the ground before we see any money.”

During House debate on the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill, **Representative Jerry Lewis, the top Republican on the House Appropriations Committee**, warned that Congress

may have to resort to an omnibus appropriations bill that combines several appropriations bills into one if it does not pick up the pace.

“Based on the present pace in both bodies, I have grave concern about our ability to complete our work this year through the regular order process,” he said. “While it is only July, if past experience is any guide, a warning is in order. Once again the Senate is showing absolutely no inclination or ability towards moving appropriations bills, setting up the inevitable end-of-the-year omnibus strategy.”

For funding levels for specific programs, visit <http://www.all4ed.org/legislative/FY08budget.html>.

The president’s Statement of Administration Policy is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/legislative/sap/110-1/hr3043sap-h.pdf>.

How did your member of Congress vote on the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill? The vote breakdown is available at <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2007/roll686.xml>.



EVERY STUDENT COUNTS: New Legislation Would Fix Flaws in NCLB Related to Reporting and Calculating High School Graduation Rates

Although graduation rates are a fundamental indicator of how well the nation’s public school system is performing, inaccurate data, misleading calculations and reporting, and flawed accountability systems have resulted in states reporting graduation rates that often overstate the percentages of students who earn high school diplomas. As a result, unacceptably low graduation rates have been obscured, and the American public has largely been left in the dark about how many students drop out of high school.

Fortunately, stakeholders at the local, state, and national levels have taken important steps to bring credibility back into graduation rate reporting. For example, the U.S. Department of Education has begun reporting its own estimate of the graduation rate of each state, and the nation’s governors have signed a compact to implement a common, accurate graduation rate and to create better systems and methods of collecting, analyzing, and reporting graduation and dropout data.

On July 10, **Congressman Bobby Scott (D-VA)** joined this effort when he introduced new legislation that would fix three significant flaws that currently exist in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) related to the way that states report, calculate, and use graduation rates for accountability. Dubbed the Every Student Counts Act, the legislation builds on the governors’ compact and seeks to hold high schools responsible for graduating students by improving the calculation of and accountability for high school graduation rates.

“The current high school accountability system is failing our students and our future as a nation,” Scott said. “Almost one-third of all high school students in the United States fail to graduate with their peers—about 1.2 million every year—and the numbers are worse for minorities as

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compared to nonminority students. I am introducing the Every Student Counts Act to bring meaningful accountability to high schools and help reduce the high school dropout rate.”

In drafting NCLB, Congress recognized that holding schools accountable for their test scores could create perverse incentives to “push out” low-performing students. For example, schools could encourage or force low-performing students to drop out before they take the test used for federal accountability as a way to increase test scores and meet progress goals. To combat these incentives, NCLB includes a requirement that high schools also meet state-set graduation goals as a part of its accountability system. Unfortunately, when states were developing their accountability systems, many set the bar at very low levels or chose to use misleading graduation rate calculations.

The Every Student Counts Act would require states, schools, and districts to use a common, accurate, graduation rate calculation. It would also require high schools with graduation rates of less than 90 percent to make aggressive but attainable increases in their graduation rates as part of the annual accountability requirements under NCLB. To ensure that schools are held accountable for the graduation of all students, this requirement applies to both the overall graduation rate and to the graduation rate of each subgroup of students.

In addition to a misleading graduation rate calculation, there are two other significant flaws in NCLB that undermine the intention of the law and weaken the role of graduation rates in both accountability for student success and as a tool for identifying low-performing high schools and targeting support and interventions.

While NCLB sets 100 percent proficiency on state tests in reading and math as its ultimate goal, it does not set an ultimate graduation rate goal. Therefore, states are not required to set—and schools are not required to make—meaningful increases in graduation rates over time. Nor does NCLB require the disaggregated graduation rates of student subgroups to increase as part of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determinations; only aggregate (not student subgroup) graduation rates are used in the determination of AYP. Consequently, the low graduation rates of poor and minority students, students with limited English proficiency, and students with disabilities are not factored into AYP determinations and are often hidden from the public eye.

To correct these flaws, the Every Student Counts Act would ensure that schools are held accountable for increasing the graduation rates of all students by requiring graduation rates to be disaggregated for both reporting and accountability purposes. The bill would also require that schools make incremental annual improvements in their overall and disaggregated graduation rates. These annual goals are based on rates of improvement that have been achieved in successful high schools.

In addition to holding high schools accountable, the bill would also help to better identify low-performing high schools for additional attention and support and would give schools credit for graduating students who need extra time by allowing increases in both the four-year and five-year graduation rates to count toward achieving AYP.

Currently, twenty members of Congress have signed on as cosponsors of the Every Student Counts Act. A complete list of the cosponsors, as well as other information on the bill and other high school legislation currently pending before Congress, is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/legislative/index.html>.

U.S. Department of Education Announces \$62.2 Million in Grants for Longitudinal Data Systems

Earlier this month, the U.S. Department of Education announced \$62.2 million in grants to thirteen states to help them design, develop, and implement longitudinal data systems that can track individual students throughout their school career. The grants range from \$3.2 million to \$6 million and extend for three years.

In order to provide educators with data necessary to improve student achievement, states need systems that collect high-quality individual student data and that enable the identification of successful schools and practices, calculation of accurate graduation rates, and accountability for the success of every child. Despite significant progress, far too many schools, districts, and states lack this capacity.

States receiving these grants will use funds to develop data systems that help states, districts, schools, and teachers efficiently and accurately manage, analyze, disaggregate, and use individual student data to improve policy and practice. The grants will also increase these states' capacity for accurately reporting high school graduation rates and dropout data, and increase their capability to efficiently satisfy federal reporting requirements. For example, Kansas is planning to use a portion of its grant to track student transfers and dropouts more accurately. Virginia will use funds to support its P-16 effort by allowing for the electronic exchange of student records between K-12 schools and institutions of higher education.

A complete list of the states selected to receive a grant, as well as the grant amounts and other information, is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2007/07/07022007a.html>.

An abstract of the three-year work each state is planning is available at <http://nces.ed.gov/Programs/SLDS/stateinfo.asp>.



MEETING THE CHALLENGE: New AFT Report Highlights Ways to Attract Qualified Teachers to High-Poverty Schools

Teachers' unions and school districts need to join forces and work together to attract and keep qualified teachers in high-poverty schools. So says *Meeting the Challenge: Recruiting and Retaining Teachers in Hard-to-Staff Schools*, a new report from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Among the strategies the report lists for attracting qualified teachers into high-poverty schools are an emphasis on school safety, professional development and induction programs, better recruitment and hiring practices, and higher teacher salaries.

“We don't have to reinvent the wheel to figure out how to recruit and retain teachers in challenging areas. We can learn from districts that have had success,” said **AFT President Edward J. McElroy**. “It takes adequate funding and strong teacher-district partnerships to negotiate effective remedies, and political will to fix the problem.”

Meeting the Challenge

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As the report points out, schools that struggle to recruit and retain effective teachers most often serve large proportions of high-poverty students. It notes that on indicators such as teaching experience, certification test pass rates, competitiveness of undergraduate institutions, and SAT scores, teachers in high-poverty schools have lower qualifications than teachers in low-poverty schools. At the same time, high-poverty schools experience more turnover than those in low-poverty areas. According to the report, nearly one in four teachers at high-poverty urban schools leave each year, compared to a little more than one in ten teachers at low-poverty schools.

The AFT report lists several reasons for why teachers leave their schools or the profession. Among them are student discipline problems and personal safety concerns, a lack of on-site support and intervention for students who have learning difficulties, poor administrative leadership and support, a lack of faculty influence on decisions that affect student learning, inadequate ongoing, job-embedded professional development and other supports, and inadequate time for planning, preparation, and instruction.

AFT recommends strategies that directly address many of these concerns. “Teachers are attracted to, and most likely to remain in, schools in which the environment is conducive to teaching and learning, where safety and order are priorities, where they have influence over decisions that affect their school and its programs, where they feel supported by those in charge and where they have opportunities to develop professionally,” the report reads.

While acknowledging that each state and district are distinct and that what works in one school or district may not be replicable in another, the report calls for a “strategic mix” of programs, professional supports and incentives—which it says must be “bargained or mutually agreed upon”—to make hard-to-staff schools more attractive to qualified teachers. It divides these strategies into four primary categories: safe and orderly schools, targeted professional development that includes induction programs for all new teachers, examining recruitment and hiring practices, and identifying and carrying out school district and state responsibilities. Within each category, the report offers examples from districts around the country where these strategies are in use.

For example, in its safe and orderly schools strategy, AFT cites an example in Toledo, OH, where the district uses a behavioral specialist program to modify problem behavior in certain students. As a result, teachers are able to focus their efforts on teaching versus disciplining a handful of troublemakers. As an example of a good mentoring program, the report profiles a New York City program that the United Federation of Teachers negotiated with the city’s department of education that resulted in new funds to support a mentoring program for all new teachers.

The complete report is available at <http://aft.org/presscenter/releases/2007/071307.htm>.

Advancing Literacy: Carnegie Corporation of New York Website Tracks Recent Reports on Adolescent Literacy

Those on the lookout for some summer reading should visit Carnegie Corporation of New York's Advancing Literacy website, which includes a list of recently released reports on adolescent literacy. The Alliance for Excellent Education report *Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas: Getting to the Core of Middle and High School Improvement* is one of the featured reports. The website also includes information about reports from the National Academy of Education, the Migration Policy Institute, and the National Association of State Boards of Education, among others.

Advancing Literacy, part of a greater effort to improve the knowledge base on the teaching of reading after third grade, is devoted to disseminating research and sharing effective practices for reading instruction for older students. It provides tools for policymakers, parents, and educators and includes resources on the current state of adolescent literacy. It also explains why adolescent literacy matters and which adolescents are most at risk.

The Corporation plans to continue to identify, evaluate, fund, and promote information-sharing, research, and policy initiatives to remediate the crisis in adolescent literacy until it sees evidence that the crisis has been resolved.

More information is available at <http://www.carnegie.org/literacy/index.html>.

Registration Now Open for the Alliance for Excellent Education's Fourth Annual High School Policy Conference

This year, Congress has the opportunity to improve the nation's secondary schools as it considers the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The question is whether Congress has the will to take the actions that are necessary. In an effort to ensure that Congress's deliberations adequately address the needs of high schools, the Alliance for Excellent Education will hold its fourth annual high school policy conference, From No Child Left Behind to Every Child a Graduate, on October 4–5, at the Washington Court Hotel in Washington, DC. The conference will convene local, state, and national education leaders to discuss federal strategies for improving the achievement of the nation's struggling middle and high school students.

Last year's conference examined the consensus that has been building around a federal agenda for high school reform. Leveraging that momentum, this year's conference will focus on explicit policies that should be included in the reauthorization of NCLB to improve secondary schools.

Confirmed speakers at this point include **Gene Wilhoit, executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, Mike Petrilli, vice president for national programs and policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, JoEllen Lynch of the New York City Department of Education, Bob Balfanz of the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University, Rene Islas of Baker and Daniels Consulting, Charity Smith of the Arkansas Department of Education, and John Jackson, president of the Schott Foundation for Public Education.**

The cost to attend is \$100 if payment is received by September 5, 2007 and \$150 if received after that date. Conference space is limited, and registrations are accepted on a "first come" basis. To register, view the agenda, or access hotel and travel information, visit <http://www.all4ed.org/events/2007HSConference/hotel.html>.

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 six million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.



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