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StraightA's™

Public Education Policy And Progress



MILLER TIME: Committee Chairman Outlines NCLB Improvement Priorities; Sets September Goal for House Reauthorization of the Law

In a speech at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, on July 30, **House Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA)** stated his intention to have the U.S. House of Representatives pass a renewal of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) during the month of September.

“We want a bill that is fair and flexible—that maintains the integrity of the law through accountability while responding to the legitimate concerns that have been raised,” Miller said. “I have always said that I am proud to be one of the original coauthors of the No Child Left Behind Act. But what I really want is to be the proud coauthor of a law that works.”

Miller used the opportunity to praise NCLB for raising students’ math and reading proficiency and for narrowing the achievement gap. He also credited the law for provoking an “energetic national debate” around the nation’s educational system and the need for a greater investment in schools, students, principals, and teachers.

However, Miller noted that there was no support for continuing the law in its current form. “I can tell you that there are no votes in the U.S. House of Representatives for continuing the No Child Left Behind Act without making serious changes to it,” he said. “Schools and students are not making enough progress. Not for a country as great as ours.” Miller also acknowledged that many Americans believe that the law is not fair, not flexible, and not funded. “And they are not wrong,” he said. “The question is what we are going to do next.”

Miller went on to outline six key elements that will be part of a bill he will introduce to reauthorize NCLB: fairness and flexibility for schools, a rich and challenging curriculum, support for teachers and principals, school accountability, steps to turn around low-performing middle and high schools, and greater investments to achieve the law’s goals.

Miller said that his legislation will include a growth model that gives states and schools credit for the progress that their students make over time, rather than sticking with the current process of simply looking at test scores for one year. He also said that it will allow states to use more than their reading and math test results to determine how well schools and students are doing. He indicated that graduation rates will be one such measure for high schools.

Turning to high schools, Miller decried the high percentages of high school students who graduate from high school unprepared for college or work. He said that his bill would bring

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together employers, colleges, and states in an effort to develop more rigorous standards that better prepare students for life after high school.

“Schools must no longer prepare our students to be autonomous problem solvers,” he said. “The workplace they enter tomorrow will increasingly require them to work in teams, collaborating across companies, communities, and continents. These skills cannot be developed solely by simple multiple choice exams.”

Unfortunately, many states currently prefer to use multiple choice tests, which are cheaper and easier to grade, instead of tests with essay questions, which are more challenging but take longer to grade and are more expensive. In Miller’s vision, a revised NCLB would provide states with increased resources, which they would use to develop and administer better tests.

Miller said that the legislation he will introduce will also include comprehensive steps to turn around low-performing middle and high schools and will include uniform standards for measuring high school graduation rates. It will also work to replicate and bring to scale those secondary schools where students are high achieving and the achievement gap is narrowing in spite of the students’ tough surroundings.

A revised NCLB should also do more to ensure that poor and minority students are taught by teachers who have expertise in the subjects they teach, he said. In addition, it should work to fill staffing shortages in subjects like math, science, and foreign language while helping to attract teachers for children with disabilities and English language learners. To reach these goals, Miller said his legislation would include performance pay for principals and teachers that was based on “fair and proven models,” a teacher mentoring component, teacher career ladders, and improved working conditions.

Miller also spoke of the need to distinguish between schools with problems in specific areas, such as those that need to focus on raising the achievement of one subgroup of students or on improving results in one subject area, versus those schools that are failing almost all students (and thus that need schoolwide reform). He said that high-priority schools must receive more intensive support and resources and noted that the House Appropriations Committee had already committed significant new funding for this purpose in Fiscal Year 2008.

Miller implied that history will not consider NCLB to be President Bush’s most important domestic achievement if the president vetoes the Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education Appropriations bill this year. “The legacy of a great American education system for our children and our country cannot be built on the cheap,” Miller said.

In a statement issued in response to Miller’s speech, **Representative Howard P. “Buck” McKeon (R-CA), the senior Republican on the House Education and Labor Committee**, said that he was “disappointed” with the pace of negotiations to renew NCLB but expressed hope that an agreement could be reached soon. He also warned that Republicans would oppose any

changes that weaken the accountability, flexibility, and parental choice provisions in the current law.

“No Child Left Behind is the law of the land because it balances real accountability with state and local flexibility and expanded parental choice like no education law before it,” McKeon said. “Changes to the law that weaken any of these three pillars of NCLB—accountability, flexibility, and parental choice—will be met with strong opposition from House Republicans and are likely to be a fatal blow to the reauthorization process.”

Text and video of Chairman Miller’s speech are available at <http://edlabor.house.gov/micro/nclb.shtml>.

Register Soon for the Alliance’s Fourth Annual High School Policy Conference

Registration is now open for the Alliance for Excellent Education’s Fourth Annual High School Policy Conference. With an eye toward the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act scheduled for later this year, 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.

The conference, titled *From No Child Left Behind to Every Child a Graduate*, will be held on October 4–5, at the Washington Court Hotel in Washington, DC. Speakers who have been confirmed since the last issue of *Straight A’s* include Michael Durr, principal of the John Hope College Preparatory High School in Chicago, IL; Scott Palmer, a partner and coleader of the education policy team at Holland & Knight; and Dr. Ref Rodriguez, founder and co-CEO of the PUC Charter Network of Schools.

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. Registration information, a complete list of speakers, and the conference agenda are available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/index.html#Conf>.



GRADUATES, DATA, AND MIDDLE GRADES: Members Eye NCLB Reauthorization as Vehicle for New Education Legislation Introduced Prior to August Recess

Last week was marked by a flurry of activity as members from both chambers introduced education legislation prior to heading back to their districts for the August recess. However, with action expected to begin on an overall NCLB reauthorization bill as early as September, most members were less focused on seeing their legislative proposals debated individually than on positioning them to potentially be included as part of that larger legislative package.

Encouraging Innovation to Create More Graduates

Among the bills introduced last week was the GRADUATES Act (Getting Retention and Diplomas Up Among Today’s Enrolled Students), which was introduced on August 1 by U.S. **Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV), Senator Mark Pryor (D-AR) and Senator Patty Murray (D-WA)**. The act would provide \$500 million in competitive grants to spur innovation in the nation’s secondary schools.

“Many students in Nevada and throughout the United States currently lack the skills needed to thrive in a growing global economy,” said Reid. “The number of students who do not graduate is

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far too high, and many of the students who do earn their degree still lack the knowledge to succeed in college and the workforce. The GRADUATES Act will help tackle this problem head on by providing resources for innovative school reform to help students graduate and participate in the twenty-first century economy.”

The bill would support partnerships to create models of innovation in secondary schools to increase student achievement and prepare students for success in postsecondary education and the workforce. Partnerships would consist of state education agencies or local education agencies with institutes of higher education, community-based organizations, nonprofits, businesses, or school development organizations to create innovative models of reform in secondary schools.

The GRADUATES Act would also provide for rigorous research, evaluation, and accountability to ensure that while the legislation would support a wide range of strategies, federal funding would only be sustained for programs with proven improvement in student achievement. The U.S. Secretary of Education would then share the best practices that emerge from the research and evaluation.

The legislation supports a variety of strategies for innovation in secondary schools, including multiple pathways, personalization, early college and dual enrollment, career academies, improved transitions and alignment, expanded learning time, postsecondary and work-based learning opportunities, increased autonomy and flexibility at the school level, improved learning opportunities in rural schools, and increased rigor at all levels of secondary education aligned with postsecondary education and the workforce.

Support for Data Systems

Two additional bills would support the building of statewide longitudinal data systems to improve the collection and use of educational data to improve teaching and learning. On July 31, **Representatives Rush Holt (D-NJ) and Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY)**, introduced the Measuring and Evaluating Trends for Reliability, Integrity, and Continued Success Act (METRICS). The bill would provide \$150 million in formula grants to states for the development and implementation of statewide longitudinal data systems. States that receive certification from the Secretary that their system meets the law’s requirements may use funding for professional development and other purposes. It includes a set-aside of up to \$2 million for a state education data center to support states in developing these systems, to disseminate best practices, and to serve as a central repository for education and school safety related data.

On August 3, **Senators Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Hillary Clinton (D-NY), and Bernie Sanders (D-VT)** introduced S.2014. The legislation would provide \$100 million in competitive grants for states for the development and implementation of statewide longitudinal data systems that include all ten essential elements recommended by the Data Quality Campaign and \$100 million in formula grants to states for alignment, professional development, and other efforts to

improve the use of data.¹ The legislation also authorizes funding to support a state education data center and state educational data coordinators to improve data collection, reporting, and compliance processes.

Middle Schools Receive Much Needed Attention

According to the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), fewer than one third of the students in eighth grade can read and write with proficiency. In math, only 30 percent of students in eighth grade perform at the proficient level, and nearly a third score below the basic level. Despite this evidence that these students need academic help, middle schools have received little attention from Congress.

Earlier this year, a coalition of education organizations—including ACT, the Academy for Educational Development, the Alliance for Excellent Education, the College Board, the International Reading Association, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grade Reform, and the National Middle Schools Association—formed to bring greater attention to the lack of federal funding and support for students in the middle grades.

The coalition's efforts paid off on August 3 when **Representative Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ)** introduced the Success in the Middle Act, the first school improvement bill of its kind directed specifically at the middle grades. The bill targets the schools that have middle level grades that feed into the nearly 2,000 “dropout factories” that are spread throughout the country. Dropout factories are high schools in which 60 percent (or fewer) of freshmen will have become seniors three years after finishing their ninth-grade year. These schools account for approximately half of the nation's dropouts. “Here's the bottom line,” said Grijalva. “If we want high schools to be successful, we must start investing in middle schools in order to stem the dropout crisis.”

Grijalva's legislation would authorize \$1 billion a year in formula grants for states to improve low-performing schools that contain middle grades. It would require states that receive grants to develop early warning data systems to identify students who are most at risk of dropping out and intervene to help them succeed. Interventions could include extended learning time and personal graduation plans that enable all students to stay on the path to graduation. It would also authorize an additional \$100 million to facilitate the generation, dissemination, and application of research needed to identify and implement effective practices that lead to continual student learning and high academic achievement at the middle level.

“The middle grades have been neglected for far too long,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “In order to close the achievement gap in high school, we must also have high-achieving feeder middle schools. Federal policy must ensure that all students are prepared, not only from the early grades, but through all grade levels, to graduate college and work ready.”

More information on these bills, as well as others that would reform the nation's middle and high schools, is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/legislative/Congress.html>.

¹ A list of the Data Quality Campaign's “Essential Elements and Fundamentals of a P-12 Longitudinal Data System” is available at <http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/>.



WHAT AMERICANS THINK ABOUT THEIR SCHOOLS: Americans Support Additional Education Spending but Are Also “Searching for Something that Works,” According to New Poll

More than half of Americans (51 percent) believe that government funding for schools should increase, even though such an increase could lead to higher taxes, according to a new poll from the Program on Education Policy and Governance’s *Education Next* at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. The poll, *What Americans Think About Their Schools*, finds that even more people (59 percent) are confident that additional funding for education would translate into higher student achievement.

The poll also finds that more than half of Americans (57 percent) support the renewal of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) as is or with only minor changes. However, support among current or former public school employees is much lower, with only 42 percent saying that they support the law’s renewal as is or with only minor changes. Eighteen percent of Americans surveyed said that Congress should not renew the law at all.

According to **Paul E. Peterson, a professor of government at Harvard University and editor in chief of *Education Next***, people’s opinion of NCLB depends on the way the question is worded. “If the public is given the option of supporting the law with minor changes rather than simply being asked whether the law should be renewed, changed, or canceled, the level of support jumps significantly,” he said.

Americans were also asked their opinions on national standards and exit exams. Nearly three quarters of those surveyed supported a single national standard and a single national test for all students. Even more people supported exit exams, with 85 percent saying that they either “completely support” or “somewhat support” a requirement that students pass an exam before they are eligible to receive a high school diploma.

Although less than half of the Americans surveyed supported using government funds to pay the tuition of low-income students who choose to attend private schools, the percentages of African Americans and Hispanics who support vouchers dwarfed the percentages of whites who do so. In total, 45 percent of Americans supported vouchers, with 20 percent neither favoring nor opposing, and 34 percent opposing. However, 68 percent of African Americans and 61 percent of Hispanics supported vouchers, compared to 38 percent of whites.

When asked about incentives for teachers, most surveyed Americans seemed to prefer giving raises to all teachers, rather than paying teachers more for teaching in hard-to-staff subjects such as math and science; only 33 percent said that math and science teachers should receive larger salaries. However, 53 percent of those surveyed said that teachers who teach in challenging schools, such as those in central cities, should receive a larger salary. The issue of merit pay for teachers also drew some support, but not from a majority of respondents, with 45 percent in favor, 31 percent against, and 55 percent neither in favor nor against. However, when asked whether additional spending on education should be used to decrease class size or raise teacher salaries, over three fourths (77 percent) of those surveyed favored a decrease in class size.

Survey respondents also supported a more permissive teacher recruitment policy that would allow principals to hire college graduates whom they thought would be effective in the classroom, even if those individuals did not have formal teaching credentials, with 48 percent in favor and 33 percent against.

In its conclusion, the survey notes that the American public “continues to support its public schools,” but that it also wants schools to become more effective and is willing to endorse a wide variety of reforms it thinks will bring that about. “Americans, for the most part, are pragmatists,” it reads. “They are searching for something that works. It could be accountability, it might be choice, it could be class-size reduction, and it may be changes in teacher recruitment and pay. Reform proposals in each of these areas have pluralities in support of them. In some instances, though, sizable portions of the public remain unpersuaded by advocates on either side.”

The press release and complete report are available at http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/ksgnews/PressReleases/073007_PEPG_study.html.

KIDS COUNT Data Book Now Available

On July 25, the Annie E. Casey Foundation released the eighteenth annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, a national and state-by-state effort to track the health, academic, and economic status of children throughout the nation. Each year, the *KIDS COUNT Data Book* provides data and statistical trends on the conditions of America’s children and families, including child death rate, teen birth rate, children in poverty, and children in single-parent families. This year, the report also looks at the 726,000 children in the United States who spend time in foster care each year and what can be done to build and strengthen the family relationships that these children need.

“While keeping children safe is an essential role and responsibility of our child welfare systems, the full measure of success should be how fully the systems assure strong and safe lifelong families for every child they serve,” said **Douglas W. Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.**

The book includes an essay titled “Lifelong Family Connections: Supporting Permanence for Children in Foster Care,” which discusses how the United States can move toward having all children who are in foster care become part of a lifelong family.

More information is available at <http://www.kidscount.org/sld/databook.jsp>.



With schools around the country out for summer and Congress in recess until after Labor Day, the Alliance newsletter—although not the Alliance staff—will be taking a summer vacation during the month of August.

The next issue of *Straight A's: Public Education Policy and Progress* will be dated September 10. In the meantime, continue to check the Alliance website, <http://www.all4ed.org>, for updates on the Fourth Annual High School Policy Conference, as well as for other news and events.

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.



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

1201 Connecticut Ave., NW
Suite 901
Washington, DC 20036

Phone 202 828-0828
Fax 202 828-0821
Alliance@all4ed.org
www.all4ed.org

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Bob Wise
President

Jason Amos
Editor

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