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VETO OVERRIDE FAILS IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES: Moving Forward, Democrats Announce Compromise Plan to Slash Spending

On November 15, the House of Representatives fell two votes short of the two-thirds majority required to override President Bush's veto of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2008 Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education appropriations bill. The final vote tally was 277–141, with fifty-one Republicans voting to override the president's veto. Fifteen members of Congress did not vote.

The vetoed bill would have provided the U.S. Department of Education with \$60.7 billion in discretionary funding, an increase of \$3.2 billion over last year and \$4.7 billion over President Bush's budget. Overall, the legislation, which also funds the departments of Labor and Health and Human Services and agencies such as the Social Security Administration, would have provided \$150.7 billion in discretionary funding, \$9.8 billion more than the president's budget.

In a statement that accompanied his veto, the president said, "This bill spends too much. ... This year, the Congress plans to overspend my budget by \$22 billion, of which \$10 billion is for increases in this bill. Health care, education, job training, and other goals can be achieved without this excessive spending if the Congress sets priorities."

In their attempt to override the president's veto, Democrats hoped that they would be able to draw support from Republican moderates and members of the House Appropriations Committee, both of whom had indicated a willingness to spend more than the president had requested. Indeed, during the debate to override the president's veto, **House Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee Ranking Member Jim Walsh (R-NY)** called the bill a "good, solid work product," and a "thoughtful piece of legislation."

Democrats Announce New Appropriations Strategy to Halve the Spending Increase

In a somewhat unusual move, immediately prior to the vote, Congressional Democrats announced that they would cut the increase in spending in the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill by 50 percent. "We're going to send [the president] another piece of legislation," said **Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV)**. "This one likely will be to split the difference. And it has some tremendously difficult cuts in it."

As part of the plan, the remaining spending bills, including the Labor-HHS-Education appropriations bill, would be combined into an omnibus spending bill that would cut \$11 billion from the \$22 billion that the president has said he will not support. Reid added that the omnibus

Veto Override Fails in the House of Representatives

(Continued from p. 1)

bill would come up for a vote after Congress returns from its Thanksgiving recess but did not offer a more specific timetable other than to say that the measure would be considered before Christmas.

Explaining why Democrats announced such an agreement just prior to the vote to override, **House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey (D-WI)** said, “People might like to cast a vote without having to take the responsibility for knowing the consequences. But there are severe consequences for voting against overriding the president’s veto of the Labor, Health, and Education bill. If this veto is not overridden, the best that can happen is that we will wind up splitting the difference with the president’s wholly inadequate budget.”

Obey then explained some of the cuts that would be need to be made to move closer to the president’s budget. Specifically, he said that vocational education would be cut by 25 percent and that the proposed increases for Title I and special education would be cut from \$400 million and \$800 million, respectively, to \$200 million and \$400 million. “Please remember that everything that I have described is a ‘best-case scenario’ if this bill is defeated and we have to pursue a ‘split-the-difference alternative,’” he said.

Judging by the White House’s reaction to the split-the-difference proposal, the president could very well demand that Democrats cut spending even further. “The president has been clear that Congress should adhere to the budgetary process and pass individual funding bills at reasonable and responsible spending levels,” said **Office of Management and Budget spokesman Sean Kevelighan**. “Perhaps Democratic leadership in Congress—who has made promise after promise to complete their work—should concern itself less with capturing political news cycles and more on their fundamental responsibility to fund the federal government.”

However, the latest move by the Democrats seems to be geared more toward attracting additional Republican support than it is to encourage the president to capitulate. According to media reports, there are a lot of moderate Republicans who support much of the additional funding that Democrats have proposed, even though many believe that the Democrats overreached with their initial funding plans. On the other end of the ideological spectrum, House conservatives are already talking about trying to force Democrats into passing a long-term continuing resolution that would fund the government at last year’s levels.

“It’s a curious position [Republicans have] taken,” said **Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL)**. “They helped us write the bills. They put earmarks in the bills, they vote for the bills and then they have these symbolic procedural votes to say, ‘But if it gets right down to it, we’ll vote against these bills.’ So I’m not sure where they are.”

How did your Representative vote on the proposal to override President Bush’s veto? The final vote totals are available at <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2007/roll1122.xml>.



GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS REPORT: United States Receives High Marks for Business Economy, but Health and Primary Education Rank Thirty-Fourth

Rebounding from a sixth place finish last year, the United States knocked Switzerland off of the top spot in the in the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index (GCI). Of the twelve "pillars" that the report tracks, the United States ranks first in labor market efficiency, market size, and innovation but is thirty-fourth out of 131 countries in health and primary education. The top five countries in health and primary education are Finland, Iceland, Denmark, New Zealand, and Sweden.

The complete rankings are included in the *Global Competitiveness Report 2007–2008*, which was released on October 31. The report is designed to capture the broad range of factors that are critical to driving productivity and competitiveness. It groups these factors into twelve pillars: institutions, infrastructure, macroeconomic stability, health and primary education, higher education and training, goods market efficiency, labor market efficiency, financial market sophistication, technological readiness, market size, business sophistication, and innovation.

"The United States confirms its position as the most competitive economy in the world," said **Xavier Sala-i-Martin, an economics professor at Columbia University and coeditor of the report**. "The efficiency of the country's markets, the sophistication of its business community, the impressive capacity for technological innovation that exists within a first-rate system of universities and research centres [sic], all contribute to making the United States a highly competitive economy."

Top 10 Countries by GCI

Country	GCI Rank	GCI Score
United States	1	5.67
Switzerland	2	5.62
Denmark	3	5.55
Sweden	4	5.54
Germany	5	5.51
Finland	6	5.49
Singapore	7	5.45
Japan	8	5.43
United Kingdom	9	5.41
Netherlands	10	5.40

Among other notable countries, Korea (5.40) is eleventh, Canada (5.34) is thirteenth, China (4.57) is thirty-fourth, and India (4.33) is forty-eighth.

Ranking fifth, America's higher education system fared much better than its primary education counterpart. Specifically, the nation received high marks for higher education enrollment and for the quality of its management schools. However, even at the postsecondary level, the United States has its weaknesses, ranking forty-fifth in quality of math and science education.

U.S. Reclaims Top Spot in Global Competitiveness (Continued from p. 3)

The report also examines the “most problematic factors for doing business” in the United States. Of the fourteen most problematic factors given, it lists tax rates first, tax regulations second, inefficient government bureaucracy third, inflation fourth, and an inadequately educated workforce fifth.

More information on the report is available at <http://www.weforum.org/gcr>.

Losing Our Edge: Are American Students Unprepared for the Global Economy?

On December 4, the Alliance for Excellent Education will partner with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Asia Society, the Business Roundtable, ED in '08, and the National Governors Association to review the results of the 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). One of the few worldwide assessments that directly compare the quality of educational outcomes internationally, PISA measures the capacity of fifteen-year-old students to apply what they have learned in the classroom in order to analyze, reason, and communicate effectively. Past PISA results have shown that American students are falling behind youths of other nations in achievement.

At the event, **Andreas Schleicher, head of the Indicators and Analysis Division at OECD's Directorate for Education**, will present the PISA results, including performance results in reading, mathematics, and science. He will also provide a special focus on students' attitudes towards science and an analysis of the common elements of high-performing education systems. In October, Mr. Schleicher gave an excellent presentation, “Internationally Benchmarking Twenty-first Century Standards,” at the Alliance's High School Policy Conference. Video of his PowerPoint presentation is available at http://www.all4ed.org/events/fourth_HSpolicyconference_agenda.

Further details on the PISA event, including RSVP information, are available at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/losingedge>.



NCLB REAUTHORIZATION POSTPONED UNTIL NEXT YEAR: Tight Legislative Calendar Combined with Policy Differences Contribute to Delay

Back on January 8, 2007, **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chairman Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)** and **Ranking Member Mike Enzi (R-WY)**, as well as **House Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA)**, **Ranking Member Howard P. “Buck” McKeon (R-CA)**, and **U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings** joined President Bush to mark fifth anniversary of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and to discuss ways to improve the law, which was scheduled to be reauthorized this year. At the time, *Education Daily* wrote that the event marked the first bipartisan, bicameral meeting Bush has held on education since the 2001 negotiations over NCLB.

At the meeting, the president expressed confidence that Republicans and Democrats would be able to come together and complete work on the law's reauthorization. “In our discussions today, we've all agreed to work together to address some of the major concerns that some people have on this piece of legislation, without weakening the essence of the bill, and get a piece of legislation done,” he said. “We showed in the past that we can work together to get positive results, and I'm confident we can do so again.”

In the months that followed, President Bush and the key education leaders in Congress continued to say all of the right things and maintained that they were intent on reauthorizing NCLB before

the end of the year. Now, however, it appears that any renewal of the landmark education law will have to wait until next year. In fact, as a November 6 article in the *New York Times* points out, neither the House nor the Senate has produced a bill that would formally start the reauthorization process despite “despite dozens of hearings, months of public debate and hundreds of hours of Congressional negotiation.”

The closest that either committee came to a reauthorization bill was in late August when Miller and McKeon released a 435-page discussion draft, but it has yet to be introduced as a formal bill. Miller has been working towards a bipartisan reauthorization, but significant differences have arisen.

One of the key disagreements between Republicans and Democrats is whether to allow states greater flexibility in meeting the accountability provisions of the law. Specifically, Miller would prefer to judge schools on multiple measures, rather than relying almost entirely on a single test, as the current law dictates. As included in the draft plan, states would have the opportunity to consider other measures of progress, such as graduation rates, dropout rates, and improvements in the performance of the lowest- and highest-performing students in the school. Miller would also allow states to include scores from state tests in history and other subjects as additional measures of how schools were performing. However, those scores would only be given a fraction of the weight that math and reading results receive in determining Adequate Yearly Progress.

If renewal is to occur sooner rather than later, Miller has made it clear that the Bush administration needs to be active in seeking compromises. In a November 7 statement, Miller praised McKeon and his staff for the time and effort that they have put into the reauthorization process, but he criticized President Bush for his lack of leadership.

“It has become clear to me, however, that without real Presidential leadership, this reauthorization process is unlikely to succeed,” Miller said. “President Bush’s only real involvement this year in developing a new education bill has been to make an occasional speech urging Congress to stay the course. That has been counterproductive given how clearly unfair and inflexible the law is.”

For now, the plan for moving forward is to reach out to a variety of constituencies who would be affected by a reauthorized NCLB in hopes of getting buy-in on a bill that could be introduced early next year. According to some education observers, putting the bill off until next year severely diminishes its chances for enactment before 2010 because of the political maelstrom that will accompany next year’s Congressional elections and the campaign for president that begins in earnest on January 3, when Iowa holds its presidential caucus. However, the chances for reauthorization go up dramatically if an agreement can be reached on a strong compromise bill—especially given that President Bush and key education leaders in Congress all support reauthorizing NCLB.

Chairman Miller’s complete statement is available at http://www.house.gov/apps/list/speech/edlabor_dem/rel110707.html.

The *New York Times* article “For a Key Education Law, Reauthorization Stalls” is available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/06/washington/06child.html>.

With NCLB Renewal Stalled, Spellings Considers Other Options to Inject Reliability into High School Graduation Rate Reporting

With the renewal of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) apparently on hold until next year, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings said recently that she was open to using her authority to make changes in the way the current law is implemented. Specifically, Spellings targeted the myriad ways that states calculate high school graduation rates.

“I think we need some truth in advertising,” Spellings said in an interview with the Associated Press. She added that she believed that her department has the power to address the reporting of graduation rates through regulation.

Under current law, states have been permitted to use a variety of flawed methods to calculate high school graduation rates. As a result, state-reported graduation rates are unreliable and differ from the graduation rates reported by respected independent sources by an average of 11 percentage points and as much as 30 percentage points. In addition, NCLB does not require states to improve the graduation rates of student subgroups (racial, special education, English language learners, etc.). Not only do these practices obscure the graduation rate crisis, particularly for low-income and minority students, but they also make comparing graduation rates across schools, districts, and states impossible. Misleading graduation rates also make it difficult to accurately identify low-performing high schools.

The draft plan to reauthorize NCLB that House Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA) and Ranking Member Howard P. “Buck” McKeon circulated in late August contains language that would establish a single definition of a high school graduation rate to be used in every state. It would also boost graduation-rate accountability by requiring states to disaggregate graduation rates by student subgroups in a way similar to that currently used for test scores. In addition, it would require all schools to make increases in their graduation rates in order to make Adequate Yearly Progress. However, as mentioned earlier, Congress is not expected to act on the draft proposal until next year at the earliest.

With Congress dragging its feet on the reauthorization of NCLB, a decision from Secretary Spellings to use the regulatory process to mandate more accurate graduation rates could clear up some of the smoke currently surrounding the numbers.

Read the Associated Press article at

<http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5heUgDfYJ5ytrglmE6JqQIiCiBXOgD8SQCPE00>.

To better understand how your state currently calculates high school graduation rates, download “Understanding High School Graduation Rates,” an issue brief by the Alliance for Excellent Education, at http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/understanding_HSgradrates.



A FOCUS ON URBAN SCHOOLS: Latest NAEP Results Show Large Percentages of Urban Eighth Graders Reading Far Below Grade Level

Of the eleven urban school districts that voluntarily participated in the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress’ Trial Urban District Assessment (NAEP TUDA), the majority showed slight gains in math for both the fourth and eighth grades. However, scores in reading for most districts were not significantly different than those from 2005, when the test was last given, except in three districts for the fourth grade and four for the eighth grade. Furthermore, the data shows that, even when gains were made, students in urban districts tend to score far below the national averages in both grades and subjects tested.

The report from NAEP, also known as The Nation's Report Card, provides assessment information for the school districts of Atlanta, Austin, Boston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Chicago, Cleveland, the District of Columbia, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, and San Diego.

Focusing on eighth-grade reading in particular, results indicate that large percentages of students in each of the eleven districts lack the skills necessary for academic success. Nationally, 27 percent of eighth graders fell into this category, but in the urban districts highlighted, anywhere from 31 percent (Austin) to 52 percent (District of Columbia) did so.

"Eighth-grade students who are reading below grade level will enter their high school years without the basic skills they need to learn and achieve academic success," said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. "The ability to read and comprehend is a major predictor of how well students will do as they progress through school. Without these skills, many fall further behind and drop out altogether."

Charlotte-Mecklenburg had the highest average eighth-grade reading score of the districts studied with 260 points, ten points higher than the large central city average and just one point shy of the national average. At the other end of the spectrum, Los Angeles had an average score of 240.

With a score of 245, Atlanta improved its average by five points since NAEP was last administered in 2005 and a total of nine points since 2002, an achievement that **Robin C. Hall, a member of the National Assessment Governing Board and principal of Atlanta's Beecher Hill Elementary School**, attributed to the "concentrated efforts we have made to improve our middle schools with a range of well-respected national reform models, strong accountability, and a strong belief that the children in these grades can learn."

In math, Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Austin shared the highest average score. At 283 points, they exceeded the large central city average by fourteen points and even the national average by three points. The District of Columbia's average score was the lowest of any of the districts, at 248.

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS), a nonprofit organization that collaborated with the National Center for Education Statistics and the National Assessment Governing Board in the establishment of the NAEP TUDA, agreed that progress that is being made, but he acknowledged that there is still work to be done.

Citing the achievement gap between white students and students of color that seems to be even wider in urban schools than in U.S. schools on average, he said, "We know that our gaps are still too wide. And we know we didn't make much progress with our English language learners. But these NAEP data give us the tools we need to ask hard questions about our instructional practices."

The complete reading and math results are available at <http://nationsreportcard.gov/>.

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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In this issue:

- Veto Override Fails in the House of Representatives: Moving Forward, Democrats Announce Compromise Plan to Slash Spending
- *Global Competitiveness Report*: United States Receives High Marks for Business Economy, but Health and Primary Education Rank Thirty-Fourth
- NCLB Reauthorization Postponed Until Next Year: Tight Legislative Calendar Combined with Policy Differences Contribute to Delay
- A Focus on Urban Schools: Latest NAEP Results Show Large Percentages of Urban Eighth Graders Reading Far Below Grade Level



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