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Public Education Policy And Progress



## **NCLB ANNIVERSARY PROMPTS RENEWED CALLS FOR REAUTHORIZATION: Growth Models, High School Reform Emerge as Points of Agreement**

Earlier this month, in separate statements recognizing the sixth anniversary of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), President Bush, **U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings**, **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chairman Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)**, and **House Education and Labor Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA)** said all the right things about wanting to work together to finish the reauthorization of the landmark law as soon as possible. And while there were undercurrents of agreement in their rhetoric, their statements also had elements of a familiar but increasingly contentious debate that greatly contributed to the delay of the legislation's renewal throughout last year—namely that Bush and Spellings continue to urge only minor changes in the law whereas Kennedy and Miller maintain that meaningful changes are needed.

In a speech at Horace Greeley Elementary School in Chicago, on January 7, President Bush expressed hope that he and Congress could work together to reauthorize the law. “I’m sure a lot of people look around the country and say it’s impossible for Congress and the president to work together,” he said. “I strongly disagree. We worked together to get the bill written in the first place, and I believe we can work together to get it reauthorized.”

In fact, there are several things that the president, Secretary Spellings, Senator Kennedy, and Chairman Miller agree need to be changed in the current law. For one, all seem to favor “growth models” that would give schools credit for gains in achievement that students make from year to year. In addition, they agree that NCLB needs more focus on the high school level, and that it should include a more accurate system for measuring high school dropout rates and supports that ensure that more students graduate from high school with a meaningful diploma.

“High school graduation rates continue to be a pressing issue,” Secretary Spellings said on January 8 during testimony before a joint session of the education committees of the Florida State Legislature in Tallahassee. “While younger students in Florida and many other states continue to improve, high school students have failed to make the same progress. We must take more aggressive steps to deal with what some call our nation’s silent epidemic.”

**Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**, encouraged the president and Congress to act upon their beliefs that NCLB should do more for high schools. “Whether moved by the 1.2 million students who dropped out of school last year, by or our nation’s continued slide in international math and science rankings, the U.S.

## **NCLB Anniversary Prompts Renewed Calls for Reauthorization** (Continued from p. 1)

Congress and the president must reauthorize NCLB and make key changes that will help the law better address the unique challenges facing the nation's middle and high school students," he said. "Until a bill is reauthorized that includes the interventions and supports that these schools and their students need, the educational system will continue to fail millions of American students each year."

But beyond agreements on growth models and some aspects of high school reform, the key players have serious differences over what should be included in a bill to reauthorize NCLB. For example, in an op-ed for the *Washington Post* on January 7, Senator Kennedy wrote that NCLB's "one-size-fits-all approach encourages 'teaching to the test' and discourages innovation in the classroom."

Rather than relying almost entirely on a single test, as the current law dictates, Kennedy and Miller would prefer to allow states to consider other measures of progress when determining whether a school makes Adequate Yearly Progress, such as improvements in graduation rates or improvements in the performance of the lowest- and highest-performing students. "We need to encourage local decision makers to use a broader array of information, beyond test scores, to determine which schools need small adjustments and which need extensive reforms," Kennedy wrote.

While President Bush has said that he would accept some flexibility that does not "undermine the core principle of accountability," such as growth models, he has been firm in his opposition to changes that he thinks would weaken the law's accountability system and said in his January 7 speech that he will veto any bills that try to do so.

Another point of contention is funding for the law, an issue that Kennedy addressed in his op-ed. "Most of all, the law fails to supply the essential resources that schools desperately need to improve their performance," he wrote. "We can't achieve progress for all students on the cheap. No child should have to attend crumbling schools or learn from an outdated textbook, regardless of where he or she lives. It's disgraceful that President Bush has failed to include adequate funding for school reform in his education budgets. Struggling schools can do only so much on a tin-cup budget."

When asked whether she agreed with Kennedy, Secretary Spellings replied that funding for education is up "significantly" since President Bush took office. "We're going to spend more money on education—we always do, we should," she said. "But we also need to make sure that we're getting something for it. This 'put the money out and hope for the best' strategy that we've tried for forty years left a lot of kids behind, and that's not the point. The point is, yes, we'll spend money, but we have to have something for it on behalf of kids."

Should President Bush and Congress not be able to come to an agreement on a bill to reauthorize NCLB, the president is prepared to allow Secretary Spellings to move forward on some reforms through the regulatory process that do not require Congress to act. In an interview with the Associated Press in November, Spellings said that she was considering targeting the myriad ways that states calculate high school graduation rates. "I think we need some truth in

advertising,” she said, adding that she believed that her department has the power to address the reporting of graduation rates through regulation.

President Bush’s January 7 speech is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/01/20080107-2.html>.

Senator Kennedy’s op-ed, “How to Fix ‘No Child,’” is available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/06/AR2008010601828.html>.

A copy of Secretary Spellings’s testimony in Florida is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2008/01/01082008.html>.

### **Spellings Unveils “National Dashboard” to Map States’ Progress in Education**

In a January 10 speech at the National Press Club on the No Child Left Behind Act, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings unveiled the “National Dashboard,” a new tool on the department’s website designed to help parents and policymakers view their state’s performance on several indicators.

“We publish data to guide and promote improvement,” she said. “We are committed to our promise of grade-level or better for every child by 2014 because it’s the right thing to do. Not just for our kids, but for our country’s long-term economic security.”

The National Dashboard contains data for the nation as a whole, as well as state-level data for all fifty states and the District of Columbia. For example, it compares state-reported graduation rates to the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate, a calculation by the department that has been shown to track closely with the more accurate on-time graduation rate measurements designed by independent researchers. It also contains data on achievement gaps, student achievement in reading and math, the number of schools in a state making Adequate Yearly Progress, the percentage of a state’s teachers who are “highly qualified,” and the number of students who are eligible for and are taking advantage of tutoring and choice options.

More information is available at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/results/progress/index.html>.



### **TO READ OR NOT TO READ: Report Finds Reading Declines Have Civic, Social, and Economic Implications for the Nation**

Although there has been measurable improvement in recent years in reading ability at the elementary school level, progress appears to stall as children enter their teenage years. So says *To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Significance*, a recent report from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The report builds on the NEA’s 2004 *Reading at Risk* report that focused mainly on literary reading trends among adults aged eighteen and older. The new report examines reading trends for students and adults alike, as well as readers at various education levels. It finds a gradual worsening of reading skills among older teens and declining reading proficiency, both of which, it says, have serious civic, cultural, and economic implications.

“As Americans, especially younger Americans, read less, they read less well,” writes **Dana Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts**, in the preface to the report. “Because they read less well, they have lower levels of academic achievement. (The shameful fact that nearly one third of American teenagers drop out of school is deeply connected to

***To Read or Not To Read*** (Continued from p. 3)

declining literacy and reading comprehension.) With lower levels of reading and writing ability, people do less well in the job market. Poor reading skills correlate heavily with lack of employment, lower wages, and fewer opportunities for advancement.”

On the other hand, the report finds that good readers typically have more financially rewarding jobs, with 58 percent of proficient readers earning more than \$850 a week, compared to only 23 percent of basic readers and 13 percent of below-basic readers. In addition, literary readers, who the report defines as individuals who have read a novel, short story, poem, or play in the last twelve months, are more than three times as likely as nonreaders to visit museums, attend plays or concerts, or create artworks of their own—information that is probably not surprising. However, the report also finds that literary readers are more likely to play sports, attend sporting events, or do outdoor activities. They also are more than twice as likely as nonreaders to volunteer or do charity work. As Gioia writes, reading “seems to awaken a person’s social and civic sense” and “correlates with almost every measurement of positive personal and social behavior surveyed.”

Sadly, the report notes that frequent readers are on the decline, especially among young Americans. It finds that 48 percent of all Americans aged eighteen to twenty-four read no books for pleasure in 2002, a decline of 7 percent from 1992. The decline in reading is even more prominent among teenagers. According to the report, the percentage of seventeen-year-olds who read nothing for pleasure has doubled, growing from just 9 percent in 1984 to 19 percent in 2004.

The report also finds that the percentage of students who read almost every day for fun declines as they get older. For example, 54 percent of nine-year-olds fell into this category in 2004, compared to 30 percent of thirteen-year-olds, and only 22 percent of seventeen-year-olds. The decline in readers can also be seen at the college level, where the percentage of active readers among college graduates has fallen from 82 percent in 1982 to 67 percent in 2002.

According to the report, Americans’ reading skills worsen as they read less, especially among teenagers and young males. Using data from the *2004 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Trends in Academic Progress*, the report’s authors note that the average reading scores for seventeen-year-olds began a slow downward trend in 1992. On the other hand, reading scores for nine-year-olds who, the report points out, show no declines in voluntary reading, are at an all-time high.

Students are also more likely to drop out of high school as their reading skills worsen. According to the report, adults who are deficient readers are more likely to be high school dropouts. Using data from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, the report’s authors note that half of below-basic readers do not complete high school. Basic readers do not fare much better, with one third not completing high school. Conversely, the number of proficient readers who did not graduate from high school was only 1 percent.

Not only are poor readers less likely to graduate from high school, but they are also more likely to be unemployed or in prison. According to the report, 55 percent of below-basic readers are

unemployed, compared to only 22 percent of proficient readers. And within the prison population, 56 percent of adult prisoners read at or below the basic level, compared to only 3 percent who read at the proficient level.

“*To Read or Not To Read* is not an elegy for the bygone days of print culture, but instead is a call to action—not only for parents, teachers, librarians, writers, and publishers, but also for politicians, business leaders, economists, and social activists,” Gioia writes. “The general decline in reading is not merely a cultural issue, though it has enormous consequences for literature and the other arts. It is a serious national problem. If, at the current pace, America continues to lose the habit of regular reading, the nation will suffer substantial economic, social, and civic setbacks.”

The complete report is available at <http://www.nea.gov/news/news07/TRNR.html>.



## **STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESSES: In Tight Financial Times, Governors Propose Creative Solutions to Improve Education**

The December 18 issue of *Straight A's* reported that growth in state revenue is expected to decline in 2008 and that the budget environment would get much tighter as increases in health care spending and other issues constrain state budgets and force states to cut spending or look for other ways to raise revenue. Starting earlier this month, many of the nation's governors began to deal with these issues firsthand in their state of the state addresses. Given the tight budget environment and limited available funding, creative solutions to financial problems were a popular theme in their speeches.

### **California: Schwarzenegger Calls for Constitutional Amendment to Control Spending**

In his state of the state address on January 8, **California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (R)** said that the state's economy continues to thrive despite the weakness in the housing market. He projected that the state's revenues were not going to decline, but instead were going to hold steady compared to last year. However, all is not bright in the Golden State, as Schwarzenegger explained. Expenses are projected to grow by 7.3 percent, a fact that the governor largely attributed to automatic spending increases guaranteed by legal formulas and state contracts. Additionally, California's health care system is “collapsing under its own weight” and is weakening the state economy. Taken together, these factors help to explain why California is facing a projected budget deficit of \$14 billion in the 2008–09 fiscal year.

To help reduce the budget deficit, Schwarzenegger announced that he will propose a budget that will cut spending across the board. In addition, he also called for a constitutional amendment that would automatically reduce spending when tax revenues increase more slowly than average and set aside extra money for the future when revenues surge.

According to an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Schwarzenegger's proposed constitutional amendment is similar to one that was rejected by the state legislature in 2004 and California voters in 2005. Approval from both would also be required this time and, although administration officials said they made changes to reduce potential cuts to education and give

## **State of the State Address** (Continued from p. 5)

lawmakers more power to decide which programs would not be funded, initial reaction from Democrats, who control the legislature, was negative.

**Senate President Pro Tempore Don Perata (D)** said the constitutional amendment would hurt California's schools, colleges and universities, and programs for senior citizens, among others. "Advocating automatic cuts but failing to establish priorities and how to fund them is political expediency at its best and political leadership at its worst," he said.

Given the budget shortfall, Schwarzenegger acknowledged that creative solutions would be needed to help reform education in the state. He announced that California would use powers granted to it by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that require a state to take action after five straight years of noncompliance by a school district. He said that there were ninety-eight school districts in California that were "to varying degrees" out of compliance with NCLB and that he had targeted several districts that "on a whole have persistently failed to education children." As part of Schwarzenegger's proposal, the state would allocate a higher percentage of NCLB funds to districts that need the greatest assistance and intervention. "No more waiting," he said. "We must act on behalf of the children."

Continuing to focus on education, Schwarzenegger said that the number of high school students who take advanced math and science courses has increased by 53 percent since 2003. He called this "terrific" news for the state's high-tech future. On the other hand, Schwarzenegger was troubled by the state's dropout rate, which he pegged at between 15 and 30 percent, but acknowledged that he "[doesn't] even know exactly the number." He added that the students who drop out are "not just a statistic," but are "children lost in the black hole of ignorance, poverty, and crime."

Governor Schwarzenegger's complete speech is available at <http://gov.ca.gov/speech/8445/>.

## **New York: Spitzer Boasts of 2007 Increase in Education Spending, Faces Difficulty for Similar Increase in 2008 Because of Looming Budget Deficit**

Declaring that "without world-class education, we cannot have a world-class economy," **New York Governor Eliot Spitzer (D)** used his state of the state address on January 9 to remind voters of the boost in education funding that the state provided for its K-12 education system in 2007 and to outline a new plan to create a \$4 billion endowment for the state's universities and colleges.

Spitzer called the 2007 increase of \$1.76 billion, or 9 percent, for New York schools the "single-largest education investment in New York's history," but stressed that the new funds would not come without increased accountability. As a condition of receipt of new monies, failing districts that receive at least a 10 percent increase in funding must sign a Contract for Excellence with the state, agreeing to use the money on proven reforms such as smaller classes, more time in school, and teacher training. Additionally, Spitzer pledged to "take education accountability to the next level" and outlined accountability provisions for schools that he would seek, including improvement targets for specific schools and school districts. "We will track the progress of

individual schools every single year and we will intervene in districts and in schools that are still failing,” he said.

The 2007 education funding increase represents the first-year down payment of a four-year plan to increase school aid by \$7.6 billion and satisfy the requirements of an agreement that emerged from a process that began in 1993 with a lawsuit filed by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE). The lawsuit claimed the state shortchanged New York City public schools and other urban school districts. Although the New York State Court of Appeals ultimately ruled in favor of CFE in 2003, the years following the ruling were marked by missed deadlines and more appeals. It was not until last year that the governor and the state legislature were able to come to an agreement.

However, whether the state can meet the rest of the four-year commitment is a hot topic in New York. Last year, Spitzer said that he would provide an additional \$1.4 billion for schools during the 2008–09 school year, but some observers think the amount may have to be reduced in light of the approximately \$4 billion budget deficit that could grow to as much as \$8 billion due to the slowdown in the financial services sector. During his speech, the governor did not explicitly mention the budget shortfall, but he did offer “plain talk about the hurdles that stand in [the] way,” and alluded to “fiscal realities,” “hard choices,” and “challenging fiscal times.”

On a positive note, he also said that New York could not let itself “be paralyzed by challenging fiscal times,” adding, “Our state and our nation have always used times of challenge to expand and invest in our democracy. I believe we can—and must—do so today.”

To meet that challenge, Spitzer, like Schwarzenegger, turned to a creative solution under which the state would lease its lottery to private investors to help pay for a \$4 billion endowment for state universities and colleges. He said the proposal would allow the state to retain the approximately \$2.1 billion it receives annually to fund K–12 education, while the endowment would “generate \$200 million in operating funds each year” and propel New York’s universities into “international centers of research and learning, and into engines of economic growth.”

Observers saw the governor’s lottery plan as a way around a recommendation by a commission on higher education that suggested the state’s public universities be allowed to raise tuition without state approval and charge different prices at different campuses. After the speech, some university officials questioned whether there would be funds for improvements if the lottery plan did not pass and there was no tuition increase.

Governor Spitzer’s speech is available at [http://www.ny.gov/governor/keydocs/2008sos\\_speech.html](http://www.ny.gov/governor/keydocs/2008sos_speech.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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