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TWO ROADS DIVERGED IN A HEARING ROOM: Congressional Hearing on the Federal Education Budget Previews Two Possible Paths for Spending Decisions

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth

(Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken")

"The Road Not Taken" uses a traveler's journey through the forest to represent the decisions that each person makes in life. During a hearing on President Bush's budget proposal for the U.S. Department of Education on February 26, Frost's famous poem probably came to more than one mind as **Representative David Obey (D-WI), chairman of the House Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education Appropriations Subcommittee**, discussed the two options facing Congress and President Bush as they begin deliberations on funding decisions for Fiscal Year (FY) 2009.

Just as Frost's traveler has to choose between two roads, President Bush and Congress must decide between two options for completing the federal spending bills this year. Under the first scenario that Obey described, President Bush and Congress would come to a compromise on funding levels that would allow appropriations bills to be enacted this year. However, without a compromise, Congress would likely postpone action until 2009, when a new president would occupy the White House. Obey said that he preferred the compromise route but added that the path that Congress ultimately follows is "largely up to the administration."

Secretary Spellings Defends President Bush's Education Budget

In her testimony in support of the president's budget, **U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings** said that developing human capital is a "top priority" in today's competitive world. However, she added that the federal government has "limited resources to invest" and that its primary role had "always been to serve our neediest students, such as those from low-income families, those with disabilities, and those learning English as a second language." She then said that taxpayer dollars should be allocated in the "most effective and efficient ways."

Spellings then discussed the "priority investments" in the president's budget. "First, educators need proven strategies to strengthen instruction—especially in reading," she said. "Second, they

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need resources to help students and schools improve. Finally, they need help to make college more accessible and affordable for students of every background and income level.”

In her testimony, Spellings called education an issue that “unites people of every race and background, from both sides of the aisle, especially as our global economy places greater demands on our schools.” And, as members of the subcommittee questioned Spellings, it quickly became apparent that Democrats and Republicans alike had serious concerns about a budget proposal that would freeze funding for the U.S. Department of Education and cut or eliminate funding for dozens of education programs.

Several members of the committee were upset with the president’s proposal to eliminate funding for career and technical education, including **Representatives John Peterson (R-PA), Tim Ryan (D-PA), and Mike Simpson (R-ID)**, among others. Simpson was also skeptical about the president’s Pell Grants for Kids program and said that it would work as a voucher program and take much-needed funding from public schools. “What do you do for failing schools that the kids leave behind?” he asked Spellings.

In response, Spellings noted that the president’s budget would provide nearly \$500 million in school improvement grants, as well as increase Title I funding for high-poverty schools by over \$400 million and provide \$200 million for a Teacher Incentive Fund that would work to attract effective teachers to the neediest schools.

Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) called the federal education budget the “single biggest opportunity” to turn individuals’ lives around and put them on the road to success. Saying that she was glad this would be President Bush’s last budget for education, DeLauro implied that the president’s commitment to education lacked substance and that he was more interested in “posing for pictures” than delivering real resources.

Representative Dennis Rehberg (R-MT) noted that the president’s budget would “sorely underfund” Impact Aid, a program that provides funding to school districts that educate children living on federal lands such as military bases, and eliminate funding for rural education. He also took issue with the budget’s negative impact on the Native American population. “I don’t know what you guys are smoking, but you just don’t get it,” Rehberg said. He added that he voted to override the president’s veto last year and was prepared to do so again this year.¹

In response to these and other questions and comments about funding cuts for specific programs, Spellings said that the president had to make “tough choices” and relied on the Office of Management and Budget’s Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) to redirect funding from programs that are “ineffective, duplicative, and small in scale.”

¹ As passed by Congress last year, the FY 2008 Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education appropriations bill would have provided nearly \$10 billion more for discretionary spending than the amount included in the president’s budget, including \$4.7 billion more for the U.S. Department of Education. Rather than signing the bill, President Bush vetoed it. Hoping that they could convince enough Republicans to vote against the president, the Democratic leadership held a vote to override the veto. Although fifty-one Republicans voted to override, the final vote tally, 277–141, fell two votes short of the two-thirds majority required.

Prefacing his remarks by saying that a strong education policy was “akin to a strong national security policy,” **Representative Mike Honda (D-CA)** took issue with the logic behind the program cuts. He noted that the president routinely proposes to cut programs that are small or ineffective only to create new programs that seem to fit the same criteria.

At the end of the hearing, Obey reiterated his desire for a compromise with the president but cautioned that he would not waste the time of the Congress or of the Appropriations Committee. “Do we want to work things out, or do we just want to wait until the next president will act like an adult?” Obey asked. “We won’t waste time if the president intends to stick by his budget.”

As for which path the president and Congress will ultimately take, only time will tell. Last month’s hearing was but another step in a process that might not be completed until 2009.

Secretary Spellings’ testimony is available at <http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2008/02/02262008.html>.

Read “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost at <http://www.bartleby.com/119/1.html>.

One in One Hundred Adults Are Behind Bars in the United States

For the first time, more than one in every one hundred adults is confined in an American jail or prison. So says *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*, a new report from the Pew Center on the States. Overall, the report finds that one in fifty-four men in the United States aged eighteen or older is behind bars, but men of color are more likely to be imprisoned than their white counterparts. According to the report, one in 106 white men are incarcerated, compared to one in thirty-six Hispanic men, and one in fifteen African American men. Among African American men aged twenty to thirty-four, one out of nine is behind bars.

The report attributes the rise not to increases in crime or to a surge in population, but instead to policy choices that are sending more lawbreakers to prison and to “three strikes” measures and other sentence enhancements that keep prisoners there longer. Faced with an average cost per prisoner of \$23,876, some states are beginning to rethink their crime-fighting strategies. Specifically, the report notes that Kansas and Texas have embraced a strategy that blends incentives for reduced recidivism with greater use of community supervision for low-risk offenders. However, states continue to spend tremendous amounts of money on their prisoners. According to the report, thirteen states now spend more than \$1 billion a year in general funds for their corrections systems; California spends \$8.8 billion annually.

“Year by year, corrections budgets are consuming an ever larger chunk of state general funds,” the report reads. “Collectively, correctional agencies now consume 6.8 percent of state general funds...Considering all types of funds, corrections had the second fastest rate of growth in FY 2006. With a 9.2 percent jump, it trailed transportation, but outpaced increases in spending on education and Medicaid.”

The report points out that increased spending on corrections competes with the funding that many states want to devote to early childhood education, which it calls one of the most proven crime prevention strategies. “Increasingly, state policy makers are finding that a dollar spent for pre-K classes now can forestall many more dollars for prison beds down the road,” it reads.

So can raising the high school graduation rate. The Alliance for Excellent Education’s issue brief “Saving Futures, Saving Dollars” finds that a 5 percent increase in the male graduation rate would save the nation approximately \$5 billion annually in crime-related costs.

One in 100 is available at http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/report_detail.aspx?id=33428.

“Saving Futures, Saving Dollars” is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/SavingFutures.pdf>.



HOUSE AND SENATE COMMITTEES REPORT BUDGET PLANS: Blueprints Call for Spending More Overall than the President's Budget and Increases for Education Programs

Last week, the House and Senate Budget Committees passed two separate versions of a fiscal year (FY) 2009 Congressional budget resolution. The two resolutions differed slightly in the total amounts of discretionary funding that they would permit in FY 2009 and in the amounts that they would provide for the U.S. Department of Education, although both plans would reject President Bush's proposed cuts for education programs.

Although it is a nonbinding spending blueprint that is not signed by the president, the Congressional budget resolution sets limits on the spending and tax legislation that Congress will consider for the rest of the year. Only the total amount of discretionary spending in the final budget resolution is binding on the appropriations committees. However, the Congressional budget resolution can serve as guidance to the chairmen of the appropriations committees on how to divide resources among various federal departments and agencies, and it often sets the stage for the annual appropriations bills.

Under the resolution that the Senate Budget Committee passed on March 6, a group of programs that includes education and job training would receive an \$8.8 billion increase over President Bush's budget request. It would increase funding for the U.S. Department of Education by \$5.4 billion more than the president's budget. Overall, the Senate blueprint would provide \$18 billion more in total discretionary spending than the amount that the president requested in his FY 2009 budget.

"This budget will strengthen the economy, create jobs, and make America safer," said **Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D-SD)**. "It will allow for additional stimulus for the economy to respond to the current economic downturn. It provides tax relief for the middle class. It makes needed investments in energy, education, infrastructure, and health care. It supports our troops, cares for our veterans, and protects the homeland."

The version passed by the House Budget Committee would provide a \$7.1 billion increase for education, job training, and other programs. (Exactly how much of an increase the U.S. Department of Education would receive was unavailable at press time). The House version would also allow for \$22 billion more in discretionary spending than the president's budget, an amount \$4 billion higher than the Senate's plan.

If kept in their current forms, both the House and Senate plans would likely set up a showdown with President Bush similar to last year when Congress proposed to spend approximately \$23 billion more in discretionary spending than the president proposed in his budget.

Both budget plans are scheduled to receive consideration on the floor of their respective chambers the week of March 10. The plans will certainly come under fire from Republicans, who have said that the Democrats' budget plan would raise taxes to fund unnecessary spending increases.

"Full of gimmicks, tax hikes, wasteful spending increases, and lacking any reforms to entitlement programs or the taxpayer-funded earmark system, this Democratic budget is not even

remotely fiscally responsible,” said **House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH)**. “As this measure moves through the legislative process, I welcome like-minded Democrats to join with Republicans to craft a blueprint that keeps our nation on track toward balancing the federal budget without raising taxes.”

The like-minded Democrats that Boehner alludes to could include the Blue Dogs, a group of more than forty-five economically conservative Democrats who generally favor a balanced federal budget and accountability for taxpayer dollars. While there are enough House Democrats to pass the Congressional budget resolution without any Republican support, the support of the Blue Dogs is a necessary component of that strategy.



“WHAT KEEPS GOOD TEACHERS IN THE CLASSROOM?”: New Alliance Issue Brief Examines Which Teachers Leave and Why

A teacher’s decision to stay at or leave a particular school is contingent on a variety of factors, ranging from the teacher’s personal characteristics to his or her satisfaction with the school’s environment. But to keep teachers in the classroom and help them to succeed there, it is critical to give teachers the help they need, such as mentoring and support programs designed for new teachers—especially those in struggling schools. So says “What Keeps Good Teachers in the Classroom?: Understanding and Reducing Teacher Turnover,” a new brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education that explores the costs associated with teachers leaving their schools or the teaching profession, the characteristics of those likely to leave, and what can be done to prevent unnecessary and costly turnover.

“Putting the best teachers in our classrooms is a good start,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “But they need to want to stay. Teachers put the quality in education, and it’s up to us to make sure the quality is in the teachers.”

According to the brief, approximately 157,000 teachers leave the profession every year. In addition, more than 232,000 other teachers change schools in pursuit of better working conditions. Together, these numbers mean that an estimated 12 percent of the total teacher workforce is in flux every year—and these figures do not include the teachers who retire.

The brief finds that the costs of teacher turnover can vary widely by district and may include signing bonuses, subject-matter stipends, and other recruiting costs specific to hard-to-staff schools. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF), urban schools spend an average of \$70,000 a year on costs associated with teacher transfers—whether teachers leave the district or not—while nonurban schools spend around \$33,000 each. In addition to school-level costs, NCTAF estimates that an urban district central office spends another \$8,750 for every teacher that leaves the district entirely whereas nonurban districts spend \$6,250. By combining these school- and district-level costs, NCTAF places the cumulative costs for all schools and districts across the country—to hire, recruit, and train the replacement teachers—at a staggering \$7.34 billion.

In addition to the costs incurred as a direct result of the recruitment and hiring processes, schools and districts lose even more because of intrinsic costs associated with lost productivity and

“What Keeps Good Teachers in the Classroom?” (Continued from p. 5)

human capital—not to mention the price that students pay when qualified teachers leave in the negative effect on their academic achievement. According to research cited in the brief, teacher quality is especially critical to help low-performing, minority students. A study of Chicago public high schools finds that a higher-quality teacher had the greatest impact, measured by the increase in students’ test scores, among African American ninth-grade students. Another study, also focused on high schools, finds that having a highly qualified teacher may even compensate for racial and socioeconomic disadvantages.

Examining why teachers choose to leave the profession or transfer to another school, the Alliance brief finds that working conditions play a much larger role than retirement in explaining why teachers transfer to different schools and districts or leave the profession entirely. Citing research on teacher turnover, the brief notes that 38.1 percent of public school teachers who transferred from one school to another said that moving to get a better teaching assignment was the deciding factor. Similarly, dissatisfaction with workplace conditions (32.7 percent) and dissatisfaction with the support received from administrators at their previous school (37.2 percent) were equally cited as other important reasons in their decision to move.

The brief also examines what kinds of teachers are leaving the profession and finds that the lowest-quality teachers, as measured by the degree of change in student performance after a year in a particular teacher’s classroom, tend to have higher rates of turnover, and that the more effective teachers tend to stay—that’s the good news. The bad news is that the most effective teachers are more likely to move away from the *most-challenging* school and into schools with relatively lower concentrations of poverty and higher performance levels.

“The lower turnover rates of effective teachers among challenging schools is encouraging,” the brief reads. “But students being served by the most-disadvantaged schools should not be neglected; neither should the teachers who have the desire and knowledge to contribute to students’ academic achievement, but lack the tools necessary to do so. Instead, systems should be designed to ensure that the best teachers are teaching the students with the highest challenges and that teachers receive the training and support they need to help students succeed.”

The brief concludes that a comprehensive induction program that includes varying degrees of training, support, and assessment during a teacher’s first years on the job proves most effective in encouraging teachers to stay in the classroom long enough to make a difference for their students. It says that a well-designed, comprehensive induction program during the new teacher’s first two years in the profession combines high-quality mentoring with release time for both new teachers and mentor teachers to allow them to usefully engage with one another; targeted and ongoing quality professional development; common planning time with other teachers in the school; and networking with teachers outside the school. The induction process culminates with an evaluation to identify a teacher’s strengths and weaknesses, target future professional development, and determine if the individual should move forward in the profession. Unfortunately, less than 1 percent of beginning teachers received comprehensive induction in 2000, but those who did were more than 50 percent less likely to leave.

“Too many effective, new, and academically strong teachers who have the potential to positively influence the nation’s students leave or move away from disadvantaged classrooms every year because supports are not available to them,” the brief reads. “High-quality, comprehensive induction, although not a panacea on its own, can give the latter group the tools necessary to succeed in challenging classrooms and help new teachers become effective in a shorter amount of time. . . . When teachers are not supported, the loss—to taxpayers, educators, schools, communities, and students—is immense.”

The complete brief is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/TeachTurn.pdf>.



STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESS: Crist Seeks Additional Funding for Merit Pay for Teachers

In his state of the state address on March 4, **Florida Governor Charlie Crist (R)** talked about the need to direct the money to five priority “pillars,” with one being world-class schools.

Crist advocated fully funding the Merit Award Program, a merit-based pay system signed into Florida law in March 2007. Under this program, school districts are able to provide financial rewards to teachers whose efforts have resulted in positive outcomes for students. The program allows for bonuses ranging from 5 to 10 percent of the districtwide average pay and has no cutoff. Currently, the number of bonuses issued is limited by the dollars appropriated.

“The Merit Award Program . . . created last year rewards our best and brightest public school teachers,” Crist said. “I recommend we fully fund these teacher bonuses for those who improve student achievement and who work diligently to improve their teaching skills through national peer review.”

The governor also remarked upon Florida’s gains in student achievement in reading and math over the past several years. He noted, “Florida’s school performance has now risen from thirty-first to fourteenth among all states and risen to seventh in achievement.”

Finally, Crist proposed an increase for higher education. “Florida’s universities and community colleges provide the next critical step in the education of our people,” he said. “These institutions are producing the future leaders of our state, our nation and the world. We must continue to invest in higher education.”

Governor Crist’s complete speech is available at http://www.flgov.com/2008_sos.

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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