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DUNCAN OUTLINES OBAMA'S EDUCATION BUDGET BEFORE HOUSE AND SENATE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEES

On June 3, in appearances before the Senate and House appropriations subcommittees with jurisdiction over funding for the U.S. Department of Education, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** outlined key aspects of President Obama's Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 budget request and discussed how the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) would serve the dual role of creating and preserving jobs while also promoting school reforms. However, Duncan also faced pointed questions from key Democrats on several of President Obama's budget proposals, including one that would shift \$1.5 billion in Title I funding into School Improvement Grants.

During his testimony before the Senate Labor, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Education Appropriations Subcommittee, Duncan explained that the president's budget would support children from cradle to career while also moving the nation toward the president's goal of having the largest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020.

Duncan also highlighted the need to turn around low performing schools as one of President Obama's key priorities. "We know that too many of our schools are letting our children down," he said. "In too many places achievement is low and not improving. For example, in approximately two thousand high schools, 60 percent of the entering freshman class will drop out by the time they're supposed to be seniors. That collective loss of human potential and the long-term negative impact on our economy are both staggering."

As part of ARRA, Duncan said that the U.S. Department of Education asked states to identify the bottom five percent of their schools. Under the president's budget request, states would receive \$1.5 billion under the Title I School Improvement Program to fix these schools. When combined with the \$3 billion the program received in ARRA and the \$545 million in FY 2009, states will have more than \$5 billion to help turn around low-performing schools. He added that these resources have a "strong focus" on dropout prevention and the so-called dropout factories.

"The dropout rate for the nation is approximately 30 percent, so it's a problem that plagues every community, urban, rural, suburban," Duncan said. "If we don't do something about this dropout crisis over the next decade, the loss to our country will be \$3 trillion. So the economic impact beyond the loss of human potential is something we absolutely have to come to grips with."

Duncan also stressed the need to improve the quality of the nation's teachers and identified it as another of the president's key priorities. "In other countries, the top third of college graduates

enter the teaching force,” Duncan said. “Unfortunately, too often here in the United States, our best college graduates choose other professions. We need to change the way we promote and compensate teachers so that we can attract the best and brightest into the profession by rewarding excellence and providing supports that enable success.”

To help improve the quality of teachers and the support they receive, President Obama’s budget would provide \$517 million for the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF), including \$30 million for a national teacher recruitment campaign. Duncan said the core strategies behind the TIF are “innovative professional development and compensation systems,” but he stressed that grants awarded under the program would be for cooperative efforts between districts and teachers. “The president has often said that he believes changes to the teaching profession should be made by working with teachers, not by doing things to teachers,” Duncan added. “The chance for real collaboration here is remarkable.”

Duncan acknowledged the pushback that he has received on Obama’s proposed cuts to Title I and special education in his FY 2010 budget, but stressed that the budget request was meant to build on the foundation provided by ARRA. “I would like to note that both of these programs didn’t receive the increases they otherwise might have in the fiscal year 2010 request because of the amount of money provided in the Recovery Act and the period of availability,” Duncan said. “We hope to resume our commitment to funding increases for these programs once the stimulus money has expired. In the short term, we need increased funding for school turnaround efforts. The students attending these schools cannot afford to wait. We are in crisis.”

In an exchange with Duncan, **Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), chairman of the Senate Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee**, expressed concern with the cut to Title I, not necessarily for this year and next year, but for when the stimulus money runs out. “The problem with that is you cut the base. And you said that we’re going to resume a commitment to this funding after the Recovery Act money runs out. But if we cut the base this year, then as we move into next year, you’ve got to make that up, plus an increase. And that’s what I’m concerned about.”

In response, Duncan explained that he wanted to target the \$1.5 billion from Title I on the schools that have historically struggled. “I worry tremendously about our national dropout rate,” Duncan said. “It’s a 30 percent dropout rate. ... A couple decades ago ... there were jobs out there for students who didn’t have a high school diploma, [but today] there are no good jobs out there without a minimum of a high school diploma. ... We can identify the two thousand high schools that are producing half of our nation’s dropouts and 75 percent of our minority [dropouts]. ... What I want to do is target that Title 1 money, to really take this challenge on and not just keep perpetuating the status quo.”

Later that afternoon, Duncan also took heat for the shift in Title I funds from **Chairman Dave Obey (D-WI)** during an appearance before the House Labor, HHS, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee. In his opening statement, Obey expressed reservations about cutting Title I while funding new investments for early childhood education, new reading initiatives, an expansion of the innovation fund, and increased funding for the Teacher Incentive

Fund, which, as Obey pointed out, has yet to undergo any rigorous evaluation even though the program began four years ago.

“I want to support the administration and its education priorities but not at the expense of reliable and predictable federal support for thousands of school districts across the country that depend on that funding, and I confess I find troubling the one and a half billion dollars or 10 percent cut in basic Title I grants that you provide for in your budget in order to finance these new initiatives,” Obey said.

Turning to ARRA, Obey contemplated whether it was realistic to expect states and school districts to meet the reform components outlined in the bill if budget difficulties were forcing them to use funds to plug budget gaps and avoid layoffs. “I think it’s legitimate to question whether it’s realistic to also expect [states and school districts] to implement dramatic new reforms until the economic situation stabilizes,” he said. “I don’t want to set them up for failure in the public eyes, because they can’t do two things at the same time because of the extreme economic collapse that we’ve seen in the country, and so I would hope that you would take that to heart in the way that you administer the funds under your control.”

Duncan also encountered resistance from Harkin and Obey on Obama’s proposal to move the Pell Grant program from a discretionary program to a mandatory one and index the increase in the maximum grant amount to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus 1 percent every year. “The maximum grant has not kept up with the rising cost of college tuition,” Duncan said. “By making the Pell Grant program mandatory and indexing annual increases to the CPI, we are ensuring that students will know that their Pell Grant will increase at the same rate as their tuition.”

Harkin said that he “didn’t have a closed mind” on the proposal, while Obey pointed out that indexing the maximum award could have a “reverse effect” that would put a ceiling on the amount of future increases.

Watch video of the June 3 Senate hearing at <http://appropriations.senate.gov/webcasts.cfm>. Visit <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/06/06032009.html> to read Duncan’s prepared testimony.

U.S. Department of Education Now Accepting Proposals for Striving Readers Grants

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) is now accepting applications for funding under the Striving Readers grant program. Grants awarded under the program are designed to raise the literacy levels of adolescent students in Title I-eligible schools and to build a strong, scientific research base for identifying and replicating strategies that improve adolescent literacy instruction.

In order to be considered for funding, applications must meet two absolute priorities. First, grant recipients must implement a supplemental literacy intervention for struggling readers in middle and/or high school. Second, they must conduct a rigorous and independent evaluation of the intervention.

Using FY 2008 funds, ED expects to award \$7.2 million for new grants under this competition. Grants will be awarded on a competitive basis for a project period of up to forty-eight months. **The application deadline is August 10, 2009.** Grants are expected to be awarded in September.

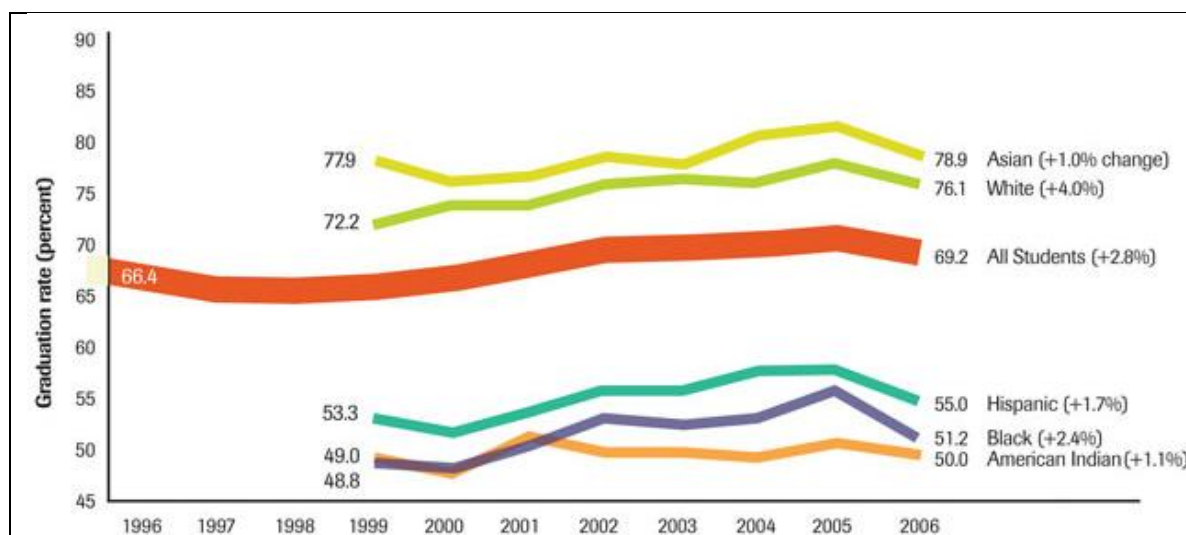
The ED program office will provide technical assistance workshops on June 17 and 18 at 2:00 pm EST in the form of webinars. More information on the webinars, instructions on how to apply, and about the Striving Readers program are available at <http://www.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders/applicant.html>.



NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE FALLS BELOW 70 PERCENT: *Diplomas Count 2009* Finds Rate Fell Nearly 1.5 Percentage Points

From 1996 to 2005, the national high school graduation rate increased from 66.4 percent in 1996 to 70.6. However, from 2005 to 2006, the most recent year for which data is available, the rate fell by 1.4 percentage points. The decrease for the Class of 2006 marks the first significant annual decline in more than a decade, according to an analysis of high school completion by the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center, which recently published its findings in *Diplomas Count 2009*.

According to the report, the national graduation rate for the Class of 2006 was 69.2 percent, but rates were much lower for certain minority students. On average, Asian students graduated at a rate of 78.9 percent, compared to 76.1 percent for whites, 55 percent for Hispanics, 51.2 percent for African Americans, and 50 percent for American Indians. For each student group, the graduation rate for the Class of 2006 was lower than the Class of 2005, as indicated in the graph below.



Source: EPE Research Center, 2009

“As a nation, we have a long way to go in order to reconcile the goal of raising college attendance and completion rates with troubling data on the proportion of U.S. students who graduate from high schools in the traditional four-year time span,” said **EPE Research Center Director Christopher B. Swanson**. “The rates are generally not as high as we would like them to be, and the pace of improvement needs to be much faster.”

The report also provides an estimate of the high school graduation rate for each state and the District of Columbia, as well as historical data that shows how much a state has improved (or worsened) since 1996. There was a great deal of variation in the estimated graduation rates for the states, ranging from a high of 82.1 percent in New Jersey, 81.7 percent in Wisconsin, and 80.7 percent in Iowa, to a low of 47.3 percent in Nevada and 49.7 in the District of Columbia. Not as much variation was found in the change in graduation rates from 1996 to 2006. In fact, thirty-three out of fifty states had a change of five percentage points or less in their graduation

rate. However, as indicated in the table below, some states saw a dramatic increase or decrease in their graduation rate.

Greatest Increases and Decreases in High School Graduation Rates from 1996 to 2006

State	Class of 1996	Class of 2006	Change from 1996 to 2006 (percentage points)		State	Class of 1996	Class of 2006	Change from 1996 to 2006 (percentage points)
South Carolina	53.2%	66.3%	13.1		Nevada	70.5%	47.3%	-23.2
Tennessee	56.7%	69.5%	12.8		Utah	78.5%	72.2%	-6.3
Arizona	56.6%	68.6%	12.1		Washington	68.0%	62.4%	-5.5
Kentucky	62.9%	72.0%	9.0		Illinois	78.7%	74.1%	-4.6
Oregon	66.0%	74.9%	8.9		Virginia	73.4%	69.2%	-4.2

As states begin to develop sophisticated data systems that can track students throughout their educational career, some individuals have begun to question the high school graduation rate estimates provided in *Diplomas Count*. In an [article in the Washington Post](#), **Charles Pyle, spokesman for the Virginia Department of Education**, was quoted as saying that the graduation rate is “something we’re working on,” but took issue with the methodology in *Diplomas Count*. As evidence, he pointed to the 82 percent graduation rate that [Virginia reported for the Class of 2008](#). Because it assigns an individual student identifier to every student, Virginia is able to track students throughout their high school career.

According to the [Data Quality Campaign](#) (DQC), forty-eight states currently assign a unique statewide student identifier to every student in Pre-K–12. However, the DQC also finds that [only twenty-six states plan](#) to report graduation rates in 2009 using the common graduation rate calculation that the nation’s governors agreed to several years earlier.¹ Until every state reports high school graduates using this common calculation, estimates such as those in *Diplomas Count* will remain one of the few ways to compare results across state lines.

Diplomas Count 2009, data on state and school district graduation rates, and *EdWeek Maps*, which allows users to zoom in on states and access detailed data for every school district and high school in the nation, are available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2009/06/11/index.html>.



ON THE FRONT LINES OF SCHOOLS: National Survey of Teachers and Principals Finds Tepid Support for Holding All Students to High Standards

Less than one third of teachers believe that schools should expect all students to meet high academic standards, graduate with the skills to do college-level work, and provide extra support to struggling students to help them meet those standards, according to a national survey of public high school teachers and principals who say that at least a few students drop out of their school and fail to complete their high school education each year. This belief flies in the face of an

¹ In 2004, to encourage states to improve their graduation rate calculations and build political support for such decisions, the National Governors Association (NGA) developed the NGA Graduation Rate Compact—an agreement that signatories would calculate and report a commonly defined graduation rate. The rate, known as a four-year adjusted cohort rate, is based on individual student data and measures the percent of entering ninth graders who graduate in four years or less with a regular diploma. Read [Every Student Counts: The Role of Federal Policy in Improving Graduation Rate Accountability](#), a policy brief from the Alliance for Excellent Education for more information on the NGA Compact and the ways that states calculate their graduation rates.

earlier survey of high school dropouts, in which two thirds of dropouts said they would have worked harder if more were demanded of them.² *On the Front Lines of Schools*, a report presenting the results from teachers and principals, says this “expectations gap” between teachers and students must be narrowed if efforts to close the achievement gap are to be successful.

“This expectations gap between students and teachers—which our research shows is very real—may be one of the most important barriers to closing the achievement gap,” said **John Bridgeland, president and chief executive officer of Civic Enterprises, LLC**. “Research has shown the importance of high expectations in boosting student achievement.”

On the Front Lines of Schools finds that 58 percent of principals believe schools should hold all students to high academic standards, but significant majorities of both teachers (75 percent) and principals (66 percent) doubt that students at risk of dropping out would respond to these high expectations and work harder. Rather than having all students meet high standards, 59 percent of teachers and 41 percent of principals think that schools should have a separate track to allow students who are not college bound to get a diploma without achieving these same high standards. These beliefs contrast with a previous finding that 66 percent of dropouts said they would have worked harder had more been demanded of them in the classroom.

The report finds a common understanding of the dropout problem among principals and teachers, with 76 percent of principals and 59 percent of teachers saying that the national dropout rate is at least a major problem, but fewer principals and teachers believe that dropouts were a problem at their particular school. Indeed, 48 percent of teachers and 55 percent of principals say their school’s graduation rate is 90 percent or higher while only 23 percent of teachers and 20 percent of principals say their school graduates less than 80 percent of its incoming freshman class.

In general, teachers (61 percent) and principals (45 percent) believe that a lack of support at home was a factor in *most* cases of students’ decisions to drop out. More specifically, 74 percent of teachers and 69 percent of principals feel that parents bore “all or most of the responsibility” for their children dropping out. Significant majorities of teachers (62 percent) and principals (60 percent) acknowledge that students’ lack of academic preparedness for high school was a factor in at least *some* dropout cases.

Previous research found nearly half (47 percent) of dropouts said they left school because they found it boring and uninteresting and did not see the relevance of school to real life. That reason did not jive with 42 percent of teachers, who feel that students who said they dropped out because school was boring were just making excuses. However, half of all teachers and 69 percent of principals believe these former students were “speaking to an important cause.”

The report finds strong support among teachers and principals for reforms that would help reduce the dropout rate such as alternative learning communities (77 percent of teachers and 71 percent of principals expressed strong support), reducing class size (75 percent and 54 percent, respectively), expanding college-level learning opportunities (61 and 58 percent), and early

² *On the Front Lines of Schools*, a June 2009 report by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the AT&T Foundation and America’s Promise Alliance, comes on the heels of earlier research by Civic Enterprises—*The Silent Epidemic*, released in April 2006, which included the perspectives of high school dropouts, and *One Dream, Two Realities*, released in October 2008, which provided the parent perspective.

warning systems to help struggling students as early as elementary school (70 and 71 percent). But, as the report notes, “none of these efforts are likely to be as successful without the fundamental expectation that all students should meet high academic standards and be provided supports to graduate ready for college and the work force.”

The complete report and survey results, as well as past research by Civic Enterprises, are available at <http://www.civicerprises.net/reports.php>.

Recommended Reading: “Failing Our Students”

“Failing Our Students,” an excellent article written by **Diette Courrégé, a reporter for *The Post and Courier*** in Charleston, South Carolina, examines how a sixteen-year-old made it all the way to high school without ever learning to read beyond an elementary-grade level.

“Ridge is 16,” she writes. “He spent more than 10 years in some of Charleston County’s inner-city, low-performing schools. His teachers and principals learned early on that he had an average IQ and could learn to read. Many of them latched on to the quiet, well-behaved and kind child, but no one taught him to read well.”

Courrégé writes that Ridge’s decades-long battle with reading began in kindergarten, where he had difficult understanding vocabulary and concepts and did not articulate certain sounds. As a first-grade student, Ridge could not master basic skills such as memorizing his phone number or speaking in complete sentences. Consequently, school officials decided that he would repeat the first grade.

The following year, Ridge was promoted to second grade, then to third grade the year after that, but his reading troubles remained. In third grade, he could not sound out unknown words or draw conclusions about what he read. At the end of the school year, Ridge took the state’s English test for second graders because of his reading difficulty, but he still scored below the second-grade level. Even with his low test scores, Ridge was administratively promoted to the fourth grade and, the following year, he was administratively promoted to the fifth grade, then the sixth grade, then the seventh grade.

In middle school, Ridge began skipping school and “finished most of his lessons by copying answers from a textbook rather than thinking analytically,” Courrégé writes. At the end of seventh grade, Ridge scored near the bottom of students nationally for reading and language use, but he was promoted to eighth grade. The following year, he was administratively promoted to the ninth grade. By the end of the first semester of his freshman year, Ridge had racked up eleven days of in-school and out-of-school suspension, and he missed more than ninety class periods. By the end of the year, Ridge had failed all of his classes and was not promoted to the tenth grade.

The following year, Ridge skipped class every day. Courrégé writes that he was arrested in late October for an in-school assault and was suspended for the remainder of the school year. Less than two months later, he was arrested again—this time on armed robbery charges, which was later reduced to attempted armed robbery. He avoided jail time and his family moved to North Carolina, where Ridge rarely left the house other than working a month-long stint on a construction site.

At the end of the article, Ridge is seventeen and has a one-year-old baby boy with his girlfriend. He took GED classes in January and attended about half of the twenty-three classes during the first session, but did not reenroll for the second session in March.

Read the complete article at <http://www.postandcourier.com/news/2009/may/03/ridge80910/>.

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.