



# Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



## **ALLIANCE JOINS FORTY-FIVE ORGANIZATIONS CALLING FOR INCREASED FUNDING FOR E-RATE: Organizations Offer Recommendations to FCC on Modernizing Federal Program for Connecting Nation's Schools and Libraries to Internet**

On September 16, the Alliance for Excellent Education joined forty-five organizations in urging the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to expand funding for the E-rate program—the federal government's program for connecting the nation's schools and libraries to the internet.

“When E-rate was first created in 1996, the FCC adopted a \$2.25 billion annual cap in an attempt to estimate the level of demand for the program,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “At the time, Google was a project called ‘BackRub’ being developed by two Stanford graduate students; Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg was twelve years old; and the purchase by the Los Angeles Unified School District of 30,000 iPads to enhance instruction would have been an impossible prediction.

“Technology, and the promise it holds to improve student learning, has evolved considerably since the E-rate cap was adopted, but the cap has not kept pace. The nation's information-age economy demands high-speed internet access for its schools and students and this cannot happen without more funding for E-rate.”

In a [letter responding to the FCC's call for recommendations on how to modernize the E-rate program for schools and libraries](#), forty-six organizations, which represent school superintendents, teachers, principals, school boards, libraries, assessment consortia, rural schools, civil rights organizations, and education technology organizations, collectively note that demand for E-rate funds outpaces supply by more than two-to-one.

“For funding year 2013, \$4.99 billion was requested in support; however, E-rate funding is capped at \$2.38 billion,” the letter notes. “This funding gap does not represent the total costs associated with developing a fully functional technological infrastructure that can provide 99 percent of students with high-speed internet access in their schools and libraries. ... We urge the FCC to increase funding for E-rate in order to achieve this critical goal without diverting funds from other universal service programs.”

In addition to the request for more funding, the organizations offer recommendations for how the FCC can build on E-rate's record of success. Specifically, they urge the FCC to:

- 1. Modernize the E-rate program.** Since the program's inception, the success of E-rate has been measured by the number of schools and libraries receiving support. It is time to change that goal from *participation* to *capacity*. Being connected to the internet is not enough for

today's digital learning; capacity is the key. New capacity goals should be established to meet the needs of schools, districts, libraries, and library systems that ensure all students have access to the high-speed broadband needed to support quality digital learning.

- 2. Streamline and increase the efficiency of the E-rate process.** The E-rate application process has improved, particularly in terms of its online filing system, but it remains a burdensome undertaking. As a result, many of the school districts and libraries that E-rate is intended to serve (i.e., those serving students and communities in low-income and rural areas) must hire consultants in order to apply, or they choose not to apply at all. The FCC should consider taking steps to lessen the burden of the application process on applicants, including allowing multi-year applications for non-reoccurring services; developing applicant online portals that will permit application tracking and make it easier for applicants to apply; and encouraging consortia applications.

The Alliance also offered [its own recommendations](#) for how the FCC can take advantage of several “high-leverage” opportunities to modernize E-rate, including

- prioritizing high-capacity broadband connectivity;
- facilitating the formation of consortia that extend beyond schools and libraries;
- incentivizing consortia and simplifying E-rate;
- measuring the success of E-rate based on capacity;
- providing special consideration for tribal communities; and
- ensuring that secondary schools primarily serving students from low-income families receive the appropriate discount.

Regarding subjects for future consideration, the Alliance suggests that the FCC explore the possibility of permitting eligible entities to utilize funds to purchase hardware.

The Alliance also joined a second coalition of education organizations in submitting [group comments to the FCC](#). In addition to the Alliance, the coalition was comprised of Digital Learning Now!, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL), Chiefs for Change, the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, and the Knowledge Alliance.



## **SHUT IT DOWN?: U.S. House and Senate Exchange Barbs Over Short-Term Spending Bill to Prevent Government Shutdown as October 1 Deadline Looms**

October 1 marks the beginning of Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, yet the U.S. Congress has not passed a single spending bill for the new fiscal year, making it necessary to pass a continuing resolution (CR), a temporary funding mechanism that would avoid a government shutdown. Complicating matters is a decision by the U.S. House of Representatives on September 20 to pass a CR that would fund the government at current levels through December 15, but eliminate spending for the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA), also known as “Obamacare.” The measure was sent to the U.S. Senate where **Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV)** said it will not pass.

“Republicans are simply postponing for a few days the inevitable choice they must face: pass a clean bill to fund the government, or force a shutdown,” [Reid said](#). “I have said it before, but it seems to bear repeating: the Senate will not pass any bill that defunds or delays Obamacare.”

The most likely path forward for the CR in the Senate would be to remove the ACA provision from the bill, pass it, and send it back to the House. At some point in the process, however, Reid would need sixty votes to invoke cloture and overcome attempts to delay the bill’s consideration through a filibuster. Democrats only control fifty-four votes in the Senate, meaning at least six Republicans would need to support such a plan.

Were the Senate to send a CR to the House without the ACA provision, it is unknown if the House would pass it before October 1 or allow the government to shutdown. Already some government observers say to expect a shutdown for at least a few overnight hours while the two parties work together on an agreement; others think the shutdown could extend for a few days to a week. Ultimately, most seem to think that some combination of House Republicans and House Democrats will come together to pass a CR without the ACA provision. Whether an agreement will come before the government shuts down or after is the major question.

Even if Congress agrees on a CR that funds the government through December 15, there is no guarantee that Republicans and Democrats can come up with a more permanent solution by that date, meaning that the nation could be experiencing these same issues come Christmas.

In addition to the disagreement over ACA, the House and the Senate also differ on the overall spending limit for FY 2014. Under the spending plan adopted by the House, the overall spending cap is set at \$967 billion, which is \$91 billion less than the \$1.058 trillion cap adopted by the Senate. This large disparity in spending caps affects all twelve appropriations bills, but none more than the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education appropriations bill. The House would fund the bill at \$122 billion, compared to \$164 billion in the Senate. To match the House’s level, the Senate would need to cut funding for every program included in its bill by an average of 25 percent.

Of the \$164 billion, the Senate would devote \$69.2 billion, which includes spending on Pell Grants, to the U.S. Department of Education under an appropriations bill that the Senate Appropriations Committee passed on July 11. More information on the bill is available at <http://all4ed.org/articles/vol13no10a/>.

Proposed funding levels for individual education programs are available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget14/14action.pdf>. The House has not made public proposed funding levels for individual federal education programs.

Complicating budget matters even further is the debt ceiling. Legislation must be passed to increase the debt ceiling by mid-October or the United States will default on its debt, according to [U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Jacob Lew](#). House Republican leaders may tie an increase in the debt ceiling to a one-year delay in the implementation of ACA—a stipulation that would face opposition from the White House and Senate Democrats.



## **NO RECOVERY HERE: Most States Funding Schools Less Than Before the Recession, New CBPP Report Finds**

Per-pupil spending in at least thirty-four states was less in the 2013–14 school year than it was before the recession, according to a new report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. In thirteen states, per-pupil spending fell by more than 10 percent. At the opposite end of the spectrum, per-pupil spending grew in fourteen states, but only two states (North Dakota and Iowa) posted an increase of more than 10 percent, as shown in the table below.

### **Change in Per-Pupil Spending, Inflation-Adjusted, FY 2008–14**

<b>State</b>	<b>Percentage Change</b>		<b>State</b>	<b>Percentage Change</b>
Oklahoma	-22.8%		North Dakota	+27.2%
Alabama	-20.1%		Iowa	+11.2%
Arizona	-17.2%		Connecticut	+7.5%
Kansas	-16.5%		Wyoming	+7.2%
Idaho	-15.9%		Maryland	+6.1%
South Carolina	-15.7%		Massachusetts	+6.0%
Wisconsin	-15.3%		Alaska	+4.8%
Georgia	-14.8%		Rhode Island	+2.3%
California	-13.8%		New Hampshire	+1.6%
Mississippi	-13.1%		Nevada	+1.5%

About 44 percent of total education spending in the United States comes from state funds; therefore, cuts at the state level force local school districts to scale back educational services, raise more local tax revenue, or both. In many cases, districts have laid off teachers and school personnel in response to budget cuts. The report points out that local school districts have cut 324,000 jobs since 2008.

Although state revenues are starting to improve—state tax revenues grew 8.9 percent in the twelve-month period ending in March 2013—they remain 2.8 percent below 2008 levels after adjusting for inflation, the report says. However, even as states boost K–12 spending as revenues recover, the increases do not make up for past cuts. For example, New Mexico’s \$72 per-pupil increase this year fell far short of the state’s \$946 per-pupil cut over the previous five years.

The complete report is available at <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=4011>.



## **ALLIANCE AND FRIDAY INSTITUTE TO LAUNCH DIGITAL LEARNING TRANSITION MOOC-ED ON SEPTEMBER 30: Free Course on Planning Digital Learning Initiatives to Help K–12 Schools Meet Educational Challenges**

In spring 2013, more than 2,500 educators from all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and sixty-eight countries participated in a first-of-its-kind Massive Open Online Course for Educators (MOOC-Ed). This fall, the Alliance for Excellent Education and the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University will run a new version of the Digital Learning Transition (DLT) MOOC-Ed. Registration is now open at <https://courses.mooc-ed.org/dlt2/>.

Building on the [Alliance's Project 24 initiative](#) and the Friday Institute's Digital Learning Collaborative, this course will help K–12 educators plan and implement digital learning initiatives that enable their schools and districts to meet educational challenges. Available to educators at no cost, the course will run from September 30 through November 24.

“As students and educators begin a new school year, they are facing new challenges, including higher expectations for student learning that are associated with new college- and career-ready standards,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Through this MOOC-Ed, educators will experience first-hand how digital learning can change teaching and help students meet these higher standards. It will also help them develop a valuable plan for how to navigate their school or district through a digital learning transition.”

The DLT MOOC-Ed is specifically designed to provide educators with a professional learning opportunity that is self-directed, peer-supported, and flexible while providing structured learning opportunities. It is organized around a framework based on the work of both the Alliance's Project 24 and the Friday Institute's Digital Learning Collaborative that helps educators plan digital learning initiatives to meet district and school goals.

Throughout the course, participants will have access to experts who have successfully implemented digital learning efforts that support teachers and positively impact student learning. By conducting the course on such a massive scale—literally thousands of educators can participate—participants will also benefit from peer interactions that will allow them to discuss ideas, share strategies and resources, and exchange constructive feedback. They will also have opportunities to “crowdsource” the most valuable ideas, strategies, and resources.

In conjunction with the DLT MOOC-Ed, the Alliance and the Friday Institute released *The Digital Learning Transition MOOC for Educators: Exploring a Scalable Approach to Professional Development*, a new paper that describes the design of the DLT MOOC-Ed; examines results from the first course as determined from web analytics, analyses of online discussions, and survey data; and offers lessons learned about this new approach to professional development.

“The results of the first Digital Learning Transition MOOC-Ed have convinced me that there is great potential in MOOCs for educators,” said **Glenn Kleiman, executive director of the Friday Institute and coauthor of the report**. “It's exciting to explore this new approach to bringing together educators from around the country and across the world to share, explore, and learn about planning digital learning initiatives in K–12 schools.”

*The Digital Learning Transition MOOC for Educators* finds that participants in the initial MOOC-Ed were able to personalize their own learning experiences and that the course was engaging, easy to navigate, and motivating to further digital learning in their schools and districts. Overall, participants reported that they gained new insights and knowledge from the MOOC-Ed and that they would recommend it to colleagues.

According to the report, MOOC-Ed participants engaged in a wide range of discussion topics, and several key themes consistently emerged that reiterated the importance of

- leading with education initiatives rather than technology initiatives;
- changing the culture of teaching and learning to one that has a student-centered focus;
- identifying, implementing, and sustaining professional learning opportunities;
- recognizing that leadership is central to the digital learning transition; and
- ensuring buy-in from teachers and administrators in schools and the district, as well as parents, the community, and school board members.

Among its key findings, the report notes that the DLT MOOC-ED provides much-needed professional development and recommends that future versions should be designed for a diverse group of participants; provide flexibility to meet participants' schedules; encourage participation with local colleagues; and support personalized definitions of success and completion.

Educators who are interested in participating in the upcoming DLT MOOC-Ed can register at <https://courses.mooc-ed.org/dlt2/>.

*The Digital Learning Transition MOOC for Educators: Exploring a Scalable Approach to Professional Development* is available at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/MOOC-Ed.pdf>.



### **CLIMATE CHANGE: New Alliance Reports Say Positive School Climates Are Best Created Through Improving School Discipline Plus Access to Rigorous Course Work and Effective Teaching**

In an effort to focus on effective and comprehensive secondary school reform and the creation of a positive school climate,<sup>1</sup> the Alliance for Excellent Education is releasing a series of papers that examine how improving school discipline, access to rigorous course work, and access to effective teaching work together to positively affect schools and districts, as well as the broader education system. At the heart of the work is the belief that school discipline, curriculum, and teaching are interconnected and any effort to address one issue will be limited unless the other two are addressed as well.

“Many current school reform efforts focus on individual issues, such as school safety or the need for high-quality standards,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “The nation needs a comprehensive approach that addresses these issues in the broader context of improving school climate and student engagement, particularly in high schools.”

Released in August, the first report in the series, [\*Climate Change: Creating an Integrated Framework for Improving School Climate\*](#), summarizes key findings from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights’s Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). It notes that schools that struggle most with providing a positive school climate more often disproportionately serve students of color and low-income students. Additionally, students of color and students from low-income families are less likely to have access to rigorous course work and experienced teachers, and are more likely to be suspended than their white and wealthier peers.

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<sup>1</sup> The Alliance defines “positive school climate” as an environment committed to meeting and developing the academic, social, and emotional needs of every student.



“In the schools that reflect the worst of what [the CRDC] data shows, not only are students not being given what they need to succeed when they walk through the school door, but they are also often met with academic and discipline practices that in effect make them turn around and walk back out,” the report cautions.

The second report, [\*Climate Change: Implementing School Discipline Practices That Create a Positive School Climate\*](#), released on September 19, notes that middle and high school students subjected to harsh school discipline policies and practices such as suspensions and expulsions are more likely to disengage from the classroom and course work, increasing their chances of dropping out. In an effort to prevent discipline issues, the report recommends that schools and districts consider using early-warning indicator systems to identify and respond to potential incidents. Poor behavior and truancy are early-warning indicators that students are becoming increasingly disengaged from school.

“Students cannot be engaged when they aren’t allowed in the classroom, as is the case in too many schools employing exclusionary discipline practices,” said Wise. “Schools and districts have the opportunity to change discipline practices and break the school-to-prison pipeline by keeping students in school and engaging them in learning.”

Negatively affecting school climate are student discipline policies that (1) keep many students out of school and away from the classroom, causing them to lose critical learning time, and (2) fail to address underlying issues within the school, the report notes. The report recommends replacing these ineffective policies with ones that help build positive school climate and engage students, including “restorative justice,” which focuses on repairing the harm a student’s actions have caused and preventing future incidents.

The report highlights inequities in exclusionary discipline practices, stating that students most affected by punitive discipline practices are students of color, students with disabilities, and English language learners (ELLs), all of whom are disproportionately suspended and expelled compared to their white and non-disabled peers. It also notes a positive correlation between the number of suspensions a student endures and that student’s academic disengagement: a student suspended once in ninth grade is twice as likely to drop out of high school.

“Improving school climate by addressing and eliminating discipline practices that target certain student groups, prevent students from attending school, and criminalize student misbehavior will not only narrow achievement and graduation rate gaps, it will ensure students leave high school in a graduation cap instead of prison stripes,” Wise said.

***Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress*** is a free biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events 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. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor; Cyndi Waite; and Kate Bradley.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to improve national and federal education policy so that all students can achieve at high academic levels and graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship in the twenty-first century. For more information about the Alliance, visit [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org). Follow the Alliance on Twitter ([www.twitter.com/all4ed](https://www.twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook ([www.facebook.com/all4ed](https://www.facebook.com/all4ed)), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog ([www.all4ed.org/blog](http://www.all4ed.org/blog)).