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# StraightA's

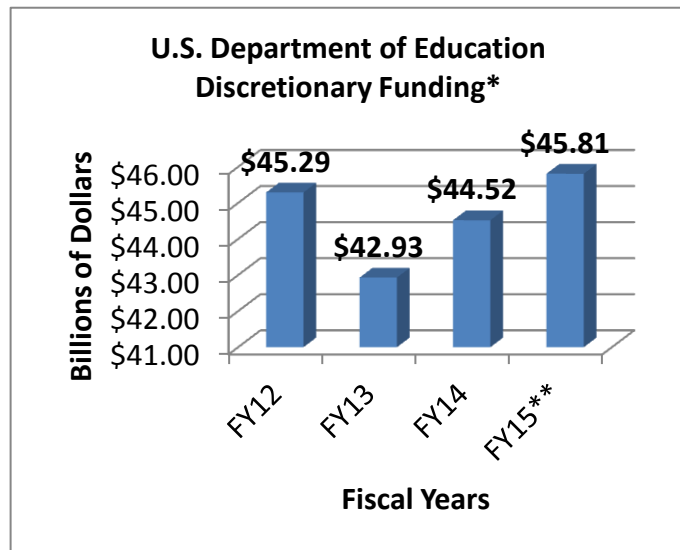
Public Education Policy And Progress



## **OBAMA RELEASES FY 2015 BUDGET: Request Includes New Grant Program Supporting Educators' Use of Technology, Funding for High School Redesign, and New Race to the Top Program on Equity and Opportunity**

Released on March 4, President Obama's Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 budget request includes a new \$200 million competitive grant program to support educators' use of technology and data and a new \$300 million Race to the Top program focused on improving the academic performances of students in the highest-poverty schools. Similar to last year, Obama also proposed a new grant competitive program for high school redesign and a ten-year, \$75 billion plan to provide access to high-quality preschool programs.

Overall, Obama's FY 2015 budget would provide \$45.81 billion in discretionary funding—excluding Pell Grants—for the U.S. Department of Education (ED), an increase of 2.9 percent over FY 2014. Among key education programs, Title I would receive \$14.4 billion—the same as last year—and special education state grants would receive \$11.6 billion—an increase of \$100 million.



\*Excludes Pell Grants

\*\*Obama's proposed budget

“The budget is not just about numbers, it’s about our values and it’s about our future, and how well we are laying the groundwork for those young children that I was with just a few moments ago to be able to succeed here in America,” Obama said during [remarks on his FY 2015 budget](#) at Powell Elementary School in Washington, DC. “These kids may not be the most excited people in town on budget day, but my budget is designed with their generation and future generations in mind.”

To complement his “ConnectED” initiative, which aims to connect 99 percent of America’s students to high-speed internet access within the next five years, Obama proposed a new \$200 million “ConnectEDucators” initiative to ensure that teachers and leaders with access to high-speed internet and technology devices for students are well prepared to use these resources to personalize student learning and better align classroom instruction with college and career readiness. According to the [budget summary provided by ED](#), funds from the program could be used to support educators in creating and using high-quality open digital learning resources and

content aligned with college- and career-ready standards; using mobile devices and digital tools to personalize learning and implement new assessments; analyzing real-time data to understand and improve student outcomes; using technology to personalize student learning and increase student engagement; and providing access to experts and effective teachers through online/blended learning environments in hard-to-staff schools and subjects.

“Technology can help teachers [provide effective instruction and personalize student learning], but technology alone will never improve student learning,” said **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** on a [conference call with reporters](#) discussing the president’s budget. “Teachers and school leaders must know how to make the best use of technology.”

Another new program in Obama’s budget is a \$300 million Race to the Top–Equity and Opportunity competition, which would “drive comprehensive change in how states and school districts identify and close longstanding educational opportunity and achievement gaps.” The program would require two types of activities. The first would involve developing data systems to identify school districts, schools, and student groups with the greatest disparities in opportunity and outcomes, creating strategies for addressing these gaps, and evaluating their success. In the second activity, grantees would use funds to develop, attract, and retain more effective teachers and leaders in high-need schools and address other factors contributing to educational opportunity and achievement gaps, such as school safety, expanded learning time, fair and appropriate school discipline policies, and other strategies that mitigate the effects of concentrations of poverty.

Duncan told reporters that the program would complement existing efforts, such as Title I and statewide data systems, by further supporting strong state and local efforts to improve equity. “Having some resources to really work with states and districts that are serious about making sure that disadvantaged children and communities have access to the best teachers, have access to the most rigorous courses, we feel really, really good about playing in this space,” Duncan said.

As he did last year, Obama proposed creating a competitive grant program that would “promote the whole school transformation of the high school experience in order to provide students with challenging and relevant academic and career-related learning experiences” that prepare them for college and a career. Examples of activities that grantees could offer include opportunities to earn postsecondary credit while in high school; career-related experiences; project-based learning; and making more strategic use of learning time through the effective application of technology, redesigning school calendars, and/or competency-based progression. Last year, Obama requested \$300 million for the program; this year he requested \$150 million.

Obama requested \$505.8 million for School Turnaround Grants, which target the nation’s lowest-performing schools. The amount requested is the same as FY 2014, but it is expected that the FY 2015 money could support new grants for an estimated 170 schools.

Obama’s budget would combine the \$25.7 million Ready-to-Learn Television program and the \$158 million Striving Readers program into a new \$183.7 million Effective Teaching and Learning: Literacy program that would provide competitive grants to states—either alone or in

partnerships with other entities—for comprehensive state and local efforts to improve literacy instruction for students from preschool through grade 12, especially in high-need schools.

Obama also proposed a new \$170 million Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Innovation Networks program that would provide competitive grants to school districts in partnership with institutions of higher education, nonprofit organizations, and businesses to increase the number of P–12 students who are prepared for postsecondary education and careers in STEM fields.

Obama requested a small increase—from \$142 million to \$165 million—for the Investing in Innovation Fund (i3), which helps to “improve educational outcomes for students by developing, validating, and scaling up effective practices.” Part of the request would support the Advanced Research Projects Agency–Education (ARPA-ED), a new entity modeled after similar agencies in the U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of Energy that would “pursue breakthrough developments in educational technology and tools.”

Funding for Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems would double under Obama’s proposal from \$34.5 million to \$70 million, with the increase supporting \$57 million in new grants emphasizing early childhood data linkages, teachers and leader effectiveness, and academic achievement, among other uses.

Obama’s budget would increase the maximum Pell Grant award to an expected \$5,830 and make changes to Pell Grant eligibility by strengthening academic progress requirements in an effort to encourage students to complete their studies on time. It would provide Pell Grant eligibility to students who are coenrolled in adult and postsecondary education as part of a career pathway program for adults without a high school diploma. It also proposes a College Opportunity and Graduation Bonus program that would reward colleges that successfully enroll and graduate a significant number of low- and moderate-income students on time.

Among other programs, Twenty-First-Century Community Learning Centers (afterschool) (\$1.1 billion), career and technical education (\$1.1 billion), Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) (\$302 million), and TRIO (\$838 million), would receive the same amount of funding as they did in FY 2014.

Republicans were unified in their criticisms of Obama’s budget saying that it would increase spending and raise taxes. “After years of fiscal and economic mismanagement, the president has offered perhaps his most irresponsible budget yet,” [said House of Representatives Speaker John Boehner \(R-OH\)](#). “American families looking for jobs and opportunity will find only more government in this plan. Spending too much, borrowing too much, and taxing too much, it would hurt our economy and cost jobs. And it offers no solutions to save the safety net and retirement security programs that are critical to millions of Americans but are also driving our fiscal imbalance.”

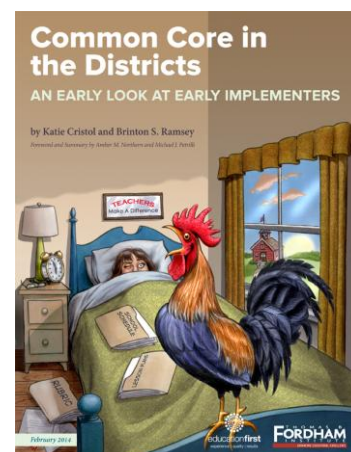
More information on President Obama’s FY 2015 budget request for ED, including funding levels for individual education programs, is available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget15/index.html>.



## **COMMON CORE IN THE DISTRICTS: New Fordham Report Examines Implementation of Common Core State Standards in Four “Early Implementer” School Systems**

Pointing to recent surveys of state education officials and teachers, including one of its own, a new report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute says that implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—adopted by forty-six states and the District of Columbia—has been “bumpy.” However, lacking in these surveys, the report argues, is an in-depth examination of “real educators in real districts” on how implementation is progressing in individual school districts.

To fill this void, the report, *Common Core in the Districts: An Early Look at Early Implementers*, takes an up-close look at district-, school-, and classroom-level implementation in four early-implementer school systems—Kenton County (KY), Nashville (TN), Illinois’s School District 54, and Washoe County (NV). Based on the lessons from these early implementers, the report argues that school districts must take “forceful action” on a “number of fronts” to effectively transition to the CCSS.



“These four districts differ in many important ways, but what they share are thoughtful and encouraging approaches to Common Core implementation, bridging the sizable distance from state policy to actual classroom practice,” the report notes. “In each, smart accountability practices and targeted professional development have increased teacher ownership of standards implementation and helped educators to align their instruction and curricular materials with the Common Core.”

The report identifies three “widespread deficiencies” that are hindering CCSS implementation nationwide: (1) ill-aligned curricular materials; (2) state and district assessments that do not adequately measure the standards; and (3) ineffective professional development for teachers and other key players. It adds that pressure from both political parties is making states question whether to move forward with CCSS implementation and remain in the multi-state consortia that are developing assessments aligned with the standards.

The report identifies five key areas to smooth implementation of any standards-based reform:

- 1. Communication:** Teachers and principals are the primary faces and voices of the CCSS in their communities.
- 2. Leadership:** Implementation gains traction when district and school leaders lock onto the CCSS as the linchpin of instruction, professional learning, and accountability in their buildings.
- 3. Curricular materials:** In the absence of externally vetted, high-quality CCSS materials, districts are striving—with mixed success—to devise their own.

4. **Professional development:** The scramble to deliver quality CCSS-aligned professional development to all who need it is both as crucial and (so far) as patchy as the quest for suitable instructional materials.
5. **Assessment and accountability:** The lack of aligned assessments will make effective implementation of the CCSS difficult for another year.

Acknowledging that each of the four districts still has “miles to travel before all of their pupils come close to mastering the new standards,” the report says it is “encouraged” by the districts, which are “looking hard at their existing practices, policies, and structures to ensure that they’re delivering the right content and measuring the right targets to support the Common Core authentically.”

Based on observations from the four districts, *Common Core in the Districts* offers four recommendations for the field:

1. Districts should avoid the political tug-of-war over the CCSS, and focus on the hard work of helping parents understand the substance of the standards and what schools are doing to help students meet them.
2. Bold action requires effective, knowledgeable leadership and focus at multiple levels.
3. Districts need to provide teachers with well-aligned curricular materials; this requires a lot of time, effort, and new material.
4. The content of districts’ professional development must focus on teacher understanding and application of the standards. Professional development structures must also support this focus.

“Right now, districts are in the near-impossible situation of operationalizing new standards before high-quality curriculum and tests aligned to them are finished,” write **Fordham’s Executive Vice President Michael J. Petrilli and Vice President for Research Amber M. Northern** in the report’s foreword. “Until we have those in place, implementation will remain confused and patchy. Yet time is passing and the new tests and truly aligned textbooks are coming. Think of it this way: we’re still in spring training, a time when focusing on the fundamentals, teamwork, and steady improvement is more important than the score. But districts ought not dawdle; they are just a year away from the big game.”

The full report is available at [www.edexcellence.net/publications/common-core-in-the-districts](http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/common-core-in-the-districts).



### **VOTER PERCEPTIONS: Voters Still Largely Unaware of Common Core State Standards, According to New Poll from Achieve**

The percentage of voters who know “some” or “a lot” about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) continues to increase, according to results from a recent poll, *Voter Perceptions: Common Core State Standards & Tests*,

conducted by Achieve. However, as shown in the table to the right, nearly two-thirds of voters (63 percent)—compared to 79 percent in a previous poll—still know “nothing at all” or “not

How Much Seen/Read/Heard About The CCSS	Voters		
	August 2011	May 2012	November 2013
Nothing at all	60%	60%	39%
Not much	21%	19%	24%
Some	13%	14%	21%
A lot	6%	7%	16%



much” about the standards even though they are currently being implemented in classrooms in thirty-five states and the new assessments aligned with the standards are nearing completion.

Among voters who are aware of the CCSS, 37 percent have a favorable opinion of the standards, compared to 40 percent with an unfavorable opinion. But when provided with a brief description of the CCSS,<sup>1</sup> 69 percent of voters supported implementing them, compared to only 23 percent who were opposed.

“Voters believe that schools should raise their expectations so that students graduate from high school ready for the world they will enter,” said **Sandy Boyd, Achieve’s chief operating officer and senior vice president of strategic initiatives**. “With just basic, factual information about the Common Core State Standards and their purpose, voters favor the Common Core over the critics’ objections. Supporters of the CCSS have a solid base of support, but this survey is also a reminder of the importance of talking to voters regularly. Voters are open-minded, believe that the quality of education is important, and need solid information about the Common Core that gets past the noise and the scare tactics.”

When given a short description of the new assessments under development that will be aligned with the CCSS, 66 percent of voters supported implementing them. Nearly one-third of voters (31 percent) strongly favored implementing the new assessments while only 22 percent were opposed to the new tests.

Complete results from the poll are available at

<http://www.achieve.org/files/VoterPerceptionsCCSSandTestsreport2014.pdf>.



### ***TAKING STOCK: Students in Linked Learning Pathways Earn More Credits in First Two Years of High School Compared to Peers, New Evaluation Report Finds***

Linked Learning is an educational approach that integrates rigorous academics with career-based learning and real-world workplace experiences. In 2009, the James Irvine Foundation launched the California Linked Learning District Initiative to demonstrate this approach in nine of the state’s school districts. Released in February, a new rigorous multiyear evaluation report of the initiative by Center for Education Policy at SRI International finds that, compared with similar peers, students participating in certified Linked Learning pathways earn more credits in their first two years of high school and are more likely to be on track to complete the “a–g” courses required for admission to California’s public four-year universities.

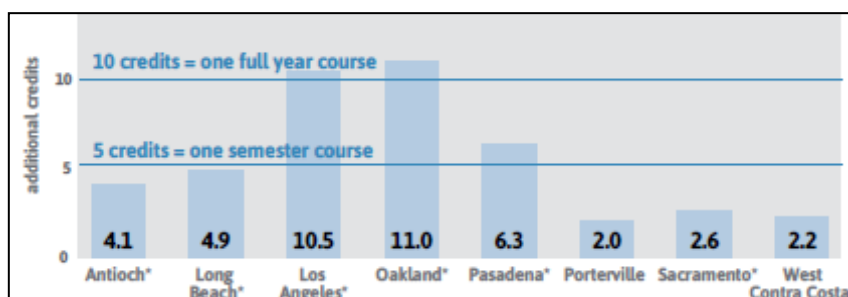
“We’re very pleased that these new data continue to show the effectiveness and potential of the Linked Learning approach to change the lives of young people in our state,” [said Anne Stanton](#),

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<sup>1</sup> The CCSS description given to voters reads, “Over the last few years a new set of educational standards were developed for English and math for students in grades K through 12. They are called the Common Core State Standards and are now being taught in classrooms in 45 states and across the country. The standards were developed under the guidance of state governors and state school chiefs who relied on teachers, content experts, and higher education faculty to help draft and review them. The goal of the standards is to help all students have the knowledge and skills they need in English and math so that they will be prepared as they leave high school and enter the workforce or go on to college, and that all students would be held to the same expectations, regardless of their state, school, or district.”

[director of the youth program of The James Irvine Foundation](#), which commissioned the evaluation report. “As Linked Learning is rapidly expanding across California, what we’re learning from the District Initiative will help guide the successful implementation of Linked Learning in districts that are newer to Linked Learning. Ultimately, this will improve outcomes for students even more.”

According to the evaluation report, *Taking Stock of the California Linked Learning District Initiative*, students enrolled in certified Linked Learning pathways earned an average of 6.6 more credits in the tenth grade than similar peers in a more traditional high school program. As shown in the image below—taken from the report—the number of additional credits ranged from a high of 11.0 in Oakland to 2.0 in Porterville.



Students in Linked Learning pathways were also 8.9 percentage points more likely to be on track at the end of tenth grade to complete the a–g requirements. The percentage-point differences ranged from a high of 17 in West Contra Costa to 5 in Oakland and Porterville.

*Taking Stock* also finds that Linked Learning students in eleventh grade were more likely than comparison students to report that they had improved a range of skills, including working in a group to achieve a shared goal (62 percent versus 39 percent), working with people in a professional setting (56 percent versus 33 percent), and communicating with adults (40 percent versus 29 percent).

Although students in certified pathways make significantly more progress compared with similar peers toward graduation each year, the report notes that comparisons of student performance on tests of English language arts and mathematics content knowledge provide mixed findings.

More information on the report is available at <http://www.sri.com/work/publications/taking-stock-california-linked-learning-district-initiative-fourth-year-evaluation-execsumm>.

***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.

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