



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

StraightA's

Public Education Policy And Progress



“BEST HOLIDAY GIFT POSSIBLE” FOR NATION’S STUDENTS AND TEACHERS: Federal Communications Commission Votes to Increase Funding for E-rate by \$1.5 Billion Annually

On December 11, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to increase funding for the federal E-rate program by \$1.5 billion annually to improve internet access in U.S. schools and libraries. The decision will allow the United States to expand high-speed Wi-Fi access to 43.5 million additional students, more than 101,000 additional schools, and nearly 16,000 additional libraries.

“Today we take the final step in rebooting how we connect our schools, libraries, and most importantly our students to twenty-first-century educational opportunity,” [said FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler in a statement](#). “The result of increased E-rate investment will be an America with students, teachers, and library patrons able to take advantage of the unlimited opportunities enabled by high-speed broadband. The increase in support is significant. It is justified. And it is smart—including not just more funding, but also important program changes that will ensure more competition for E-rate dollars and will ensure cost-effective spending.”

Created as part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, E-rate is the federal government’s largest educational technology program. It provides funding for internet connectivity and other communications services for the nation’s schools and libraries. When E-rate was first enacted in 1996, only 14 percent of the nation’s schools were connected to the internet. Today, nearly all schools and libraries are connected.

Despite that success, E-rate struggled to meet the demand—especially as internet content evolved from simple webpages filled with text to more sophisticated websites that employed images, video, and other features that required more bandwidth. At the same time, the typical school went from containing a single computer lab with a handful of connected computers to a building full of laptops, tablets, and other devices needing an internet connection. As a result, the average school had the same internet connection as the average home but with 200 times more users.

Two-thirds of the nation’s students lack access to high-speed internet (100 Mbps or more) in their schools. Additionally, African American, Latino, low-income, and rural students are more likely to be in schools with slow internet connections (10 Mbps or less) than their peers and less likely to be in schools with high-speed broadband internet needed for digital learning, according to [Schools and Broadband Speeds: An Analysis of Gaps in Access to High-Speed Internet](#), a recent report from the Alliance and the LEAD Commission.

“For two-thirds of American schools, access to the internet is subpar,” Wheeler said. “The difference between today’s slow speeds and fiber speeds is equivalent to the difference between trying to suck peanut butter through a straw, and drinking from a fire hose of information, opportunity, and knowledge.”

In the weeks leading up to the vote, educators nationwide took to [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#), and other social media outlets as part of an #Internet4Schools campaign to express support for high-speed internet connections.

“The FCC’s decision today is the best holiday gift possible for the nation’s students and teachers,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “With increased funding for high-speed internet connections, U.S. teachers and students will spend more classroom time teaching and learning rather than waiting for webpages and videos to load.”



The \$1.5 billion increase for E-rate follows FCC action in July to target \$1 billion annually to expand Wi-Fi connections in the nation’s schools and libraries. At the same time, the FCC took several steps to make E-rate dollars go further, including increasing transparency on how they are spent and what prices are charged for E-rate services.

To pay for the increase in funding, the FCC expects that consumers will see their telephone bills increase by about 16 cents a month or \$1.90 a year.

“Access to the internet is as important to learning today as traditional textbooks were fifty years ago,” said Wise. “For less than the cost of a holiday greeting card, the FCC’s decision will bring the American education system out of the internet dark ages of slow or non-existent internet connections and into a twenty-first-century learning environment of rich, rigorous, and engaging content that can be personalized for every student.”

In addition to the increase in funding, the vote also provides schools and libraries additional flexibility and options for purchasing broadband services to enable schools and libraries to meet their internet capacity needs in the most cost-effective way possible.

The vote passed by a three-to-two margin, with Wheeler and **Commissioners Mignon Clyburn and Jessica Rosenworcel** voting in support and **Commissioners Ajit Pai and Michael O’Rielly** dissenting.

A press release from the FCC with more information on the vote, as well as statements from all five FCC commissioners, is available at <http://www.fcc.gov/document/fcc-continues-e-rate-reboot-meet-nations-digital-learning-needs>.



PUT A BOW ON IT: Congress Passes Education Spending Bill, Results Mixed for High School Reform Programs

Last week, the U.S. Congress passed a spending package that sets funding levels for federal education programs and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, which ends September 30, 2015. Under the agreement, which President Obama is expected to sign this week, funding for most education programs remains the same. Obama's preschool development grants will receive \$250 million for a second year, but funding for his signature Race to the Top program was eliminated.

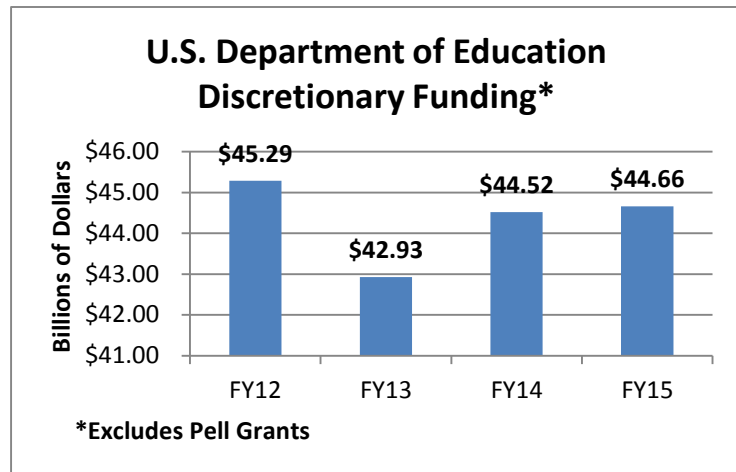
“Within a very difficult budget environment, this bill protects key investments in America and allows us to respond to several new challenges facing our nation,” said **Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), chairman of the Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee**. “I am particularly encouraged that the bill invests in high-quality early childhood care and education, provides programs that support working families, allows for an increase in the maximum Pell Grant award and number of recipients, and expands investments that allow for a continued response to the Ebola outbreak, both in the United States and overseas.”

The legislation failed to fund the president's \$150 million High School Redesign initiative—a competitive grant program that would provide students with challenging and relevant academic and career-related learning experiences that prepare them for college and a career. Nor did it fund Obama's \$200 million ConnectEDucators initiative, which would have ensured 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. The bill also eliminates funding for the \$46 million High School Graduation Initiative.

All was not lost for high school reform advocates, however. School Improvement Grants, which target the nation's lowest-performing schools, will receive \$506 million—the same as last year—while the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program, which helps states advance students' literacy skills from birth through grade twelve, will receive \$160 million, an increase of \$2 million.

Additionally, the Investing in Innovation (i3) program will receive \$120 million. Although that amount represents a cut of \$21.6 million and is less than the \$165 million that Obama requested in his budget for the competitive program, the bill directs ED to prioritize comprehensive high school reform strategies that will increase the number and percentage of students who graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education without the need for remediation and with the ability to think critically, solve complex problems, evaluate arguments on the basis of evidence, and communicate effectively. The bill also contains language prioritizing schools where not less than 40 percent of the students served are from low-income families.

Overall, the bill will provide approximately \$44.66 billion¹ to ED, which is roughly \$140 million more than the previous year but \$1.1 billion less than the amount requested by Obama in his FY15 budget. As shown in the chart to the right, discretionary funding for ED is still below FY12—before sequestration imposed significant across-the-board cuts in all federal programs, including education.



The bill provides \$14.41 billion for Title I grants to school districts, an increase of \$25 million but less than the \$14.52 billion the program received in FY12. Special education state grants will receive \$11.50 billion, which is also an increase of \$25 million but less than the \$11.58 billion the program received in FY12.

Cromnibus, Not Krampus

The overall spending package includes eleven of the twelve annual appropriations bills and, as a response from Republicans to Obama’s executive action on immigration, contains a continuing resolution (CR) for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that provides funding for that department only through February 27, 2015.

“With a bipartisan vote, the House has passed a responsible bill to keep the government running and address the American people’s priorities,” said **House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH)**. “This measure puts us on track to save taxpayers more than \$2.1 trillion while protecting jobs and supporting our national defense. In addition, by the House’s action, we are setting up a direct challenge to the president’s unilateral actions on immigration next month, when there will be new Republican majorities in both chambers.”

The unique combination of a CR paired with an omnibus bill led congressional staff to dub the agreement the “Cromnibus”—not to be confused with Krampus, the beast from Germanic folklore created as a terrifying counterpart to Saint Nicholas. Instead of giving children candy and toys for being good, Krampus punished misbehaving children during the Christmas season.

Whether you believe St. Nick or Krampus should be the one visiting members of Congress this holiday season, you have the Cromnibus to thank for allowing Congress to finally put a bow on the FY15 appropriations process—except for Homeland Security. However, whether educators are happy with what is inside the spending package is a decision best left to them.

For funding levels for every program within ED’s jurisdiction, consult the FY15 Congressional Action Table at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget15/15action.pdf>.

¹ Excludes Pell grants and other mandatory spending programs.



REWRITE OF NCLB IN 2015?: Incoming Senate Education Committee Chairman Outlines Plans to Fix NCLB Early Next Year, According to Associated Press Article

In a [December 1 Associated Press article](#), **U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN)**, who will chair the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) when the new Congress convenes in January, says that his top education priority is enacting legislation to fix the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act early next year.

Alexander, who said that the Obama administration acted like a “national school board” through the waivers it granted to states from certain requirements of NCLB, tells the Associated Press that “excessive regulation of local schools by Washington is getting in the way of better schools.”

At the same time, Alexander understands that President Obama will ultimately have to sign an NCLB rewrite before it can become law. “We’ll work with Secretary Duncan and the president in hopes we can persuade them that what we want to do is also what they want to do,” Alexander says in the article.

Alexander’s time frame for rewriting NCLB is in line with opinions expressed in a recent [Alliance for Excellent Education webinar](#) on post-election prospects for education reform. During the webinar, **Phillip Lovell, the Alliance’s vice president of policy and advocacy for comprehensive high school reform**, characterized Alexander as “eager to legislate” and predicted some movement on NCLB “early into the next year.”

He was joined in that opinion by **Alliance President Bob Wise**. “For the first time, I’m actually thinking something could move,” Wise said. “The question is whether it could move, whether a House bill can conference with the Senate, but, even more importantly, reach an agreement that the president will sign. I think he’s probably inclined to want to sign something, but I don’t think he’s going to sign just anything.”



FIELD TEST: Students Felt Comfortable with Computer-Based Format, Challenged by Math Portion of Common Core Field Test, Finds New PARCC Report

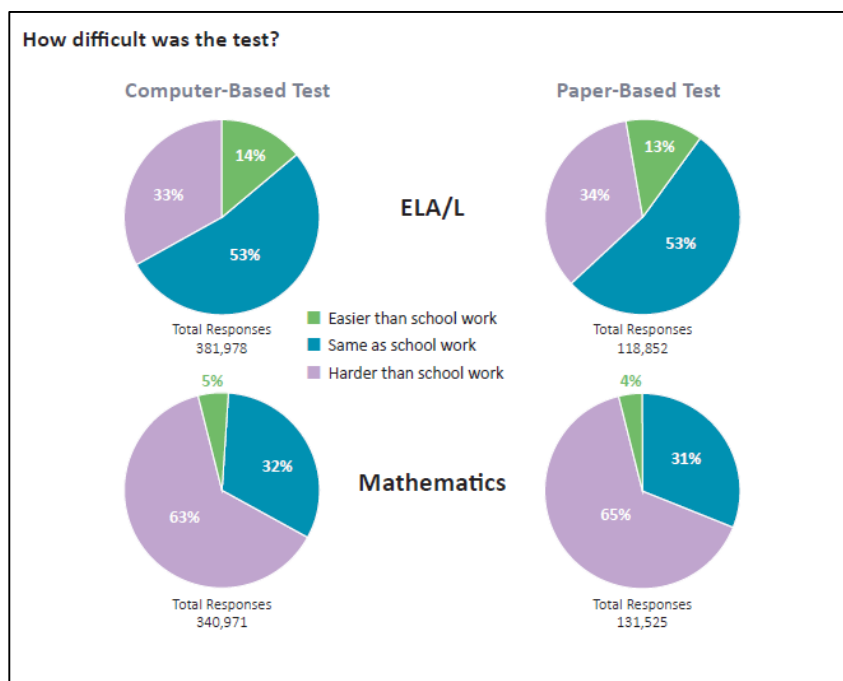
As students across the country begin the first wave of full implementation of new assessments this month, a new report by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) suggests the majority of students are ready for the assessment, but they could be better prepared for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)–aligned math portion.

More than 1.1 million students in 16,000 schools across fourteen states and the District of Columbia were surveyed during a PARCC spring field test. Of those surveyed, 90 percent said they had sufficient time to complete the test and understood the directions on both the computer-based and written versions of the English language arts (ELA)/literacy tests; 83 percent said the same of the mathematics test.

Though the computer format of the test had been a concern of educators and parents, students who participated in the computer-based field test said they found it to be “engaging” and had no major issues with the set up.

In terms of the content of the assessment, 53 percent of students said the ELA/literacy portion of the test reflected what they had learned in school, while roughly 64 percent of students said the math portion was more challenging than their course work, signifying less familiarity with the math content.

Based on this feedback, the report, *PARCC Field Test: Lessons Learned*, asserts educators could better prepare students for the CCSS math content of the test.



While there were no major system glitches discovered during the field test, the report cites several issues with the PARCC assessment that require improvement, including training and directions for test administrators and coordinators, who were also surveyed during the field test. Key improvements identified in the report include revising general directions—especially on the math tests—to make them clearer; revising manuals, training modules, and tutorials; and expanding practice tests to include paper-based components.

The PARCC assessment, along with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium are the first and only assessments aligned with the CCSS, which are currently being implemented in more than forty states nationwide. Both tests are ready for use for the current 2014–15 school year.

In October, Smarter Balanced released its field test report, *Smarter Balanced “Tests of the Test” Successful: Field Test Provides Clear Path Forward*, which finds that 67 percent of students across five of the thirteen states surveyed found the entirely computer-based testing interface “easy” or “very easy” to use. Similar to the PARCC report, Smarter Balanced students commented that the content of the assessments were more challenging than what they had learned in class, particularly in mathematics. And only one in three high school students found the Smarter Balanced test “somewhat well” or “very well” aligned with their classroom instruction.

“At every grade level, but particularly as students go off into institutions of higher education, we want to be able to say that with great confidence whether a student goes through a Smarter Balanced assessment state or a PARCC assessment state that the information that higher education is getting, colleges and universities, is comparable in terms of its reliability and validity for getting kids into credit bearing courses without the need for remediation,” said **Laura Slover, chief executive officer of PARCC**, during an Alliance for Excellent Education [webinar in October](#).

PARCC Field Test: Lessons Learned is available at <http://www.parcconline.org/sites/parcc/files/field-test-lessons-learned.pdf>.

Smarter Balanced “Tests of the Test” Successful: Field Test Provides Clear Path Forward is available at http://www.smarterbalanced.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/SmarterBalanced_FieldTest_Report.pdf.



Happy Holidays from the Alliance for Excellent Education!

The Alliance for Excellent Education wishes you and yours a happy holiday season and best wishes for the new year!

This is the last issue before the Alliance newsletter—although not the Alliance staff—settles in for a short winter’s nap. The next issue of *Straight A’s* will be January 20, 2015. In the meantime, follow the Alliance on [Twitter](#), like the Alliance on [Facebook](#), and visit the Alliance’s “[High School Soup](#)” blog for the latest education news and events.

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; Ariana Witt; and Kate Bradley.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington, DC–based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. For more information, visit www.all4ed.org. Follow the Alliance on Twitter (www.twitter.com/all4ed), Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).