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OBAMA RELEASES FY16 BUDGET: Budget Includes \$125 Million for New High School Redesign Program

Saying it was designed to “bring middle-class economics into the twenty-first century,” President Obama released a Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 budget on February 2 that includes a new \$125 million competitive grant program that would promote the redesign of America’s high schools, \$1 billion increase for Title I, \$750 million for preschool development grants, and a new federal-state partnership that would provide two years of free community college to eligible students. Overall, the president’s budget would provide \$48.3 billion in discretionary funding (excluding Pell Grants) for the U.S. Department of Education—a \$3.6 billion increase over FY15.

“Middle-class economics means making sure more Americans have the chance to earn the skills and education they need to keep earning higher wages down the road,” Obama wrote in his [budget message to the U.S. Congress](#). “The budget calls for new investments and innovation that will expand preschool and invest in high-quality early education for America’s youngest learners, provide more help to disadvantaged students and the schools that serve them, better prepare and support teachers, and transform our high schools so they help all students graduate prepared for college and career.”

Next Generation High Schools—Obama’s new high school program—would integrate student-centered instruction and “deeper learning,” which delivers rich core content to students in innovative ways that allow them to learn and then apply what they have learned. The program would have a particular focus on STEM-themed (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) high schools that expand opportunities for girls and other groups of students who are underrepresented in STEM fields.

“Students of color and low-income students now represent the majority of the nation’s students, but they remain in the minority when it comes to access to the excellent teachers and schools they need to succeed in today’s economy,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “President Obama’s high school redesign program would target these students and ensure that they graduate from high school with the deep content knowledge, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and other skills that prepare them for college and today’s fastest-growing jobs.”

Obama also proposed \$556 million—a \$50 million increase—for the School Improvement Grants program, which focuses on the nation’s lowest-performing schools, including high schools with “unacceptably low graduation rates.” And on the heels of a December decision by the Federal Communications Commission to increase funding for the federal E-rate program to help U.S. schools and libraries improve internet access, Obama proposed a new \$200 million

Education Technology State Grants program that would provide educators with the “training and support to maximize the impact of expanded access to technology to provide high-quality instruction to students.”

Among individual programs, the budget includes \$160 million—the same amount that the program received in FY15—for the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program, which promotes literacy from birth through grade twelve. This is the first time the president’s budget request has specifically included funding for this program. Career and Technical Education state grants would receive \$1.3 billion, an increase of \$200 million over last year while federal TRIO programs would receive a \$20 million increase to \$860 million. Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) would receive \$302 million and Twenty-First Century Community Learning Centers (afterschool) would receive \$1.15 billion—both amounts are the same as last year. Obama proposes to double funding for Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems from \$35 million to \$70 million.

To pay for these and other spending increases in his budget, Obama is proposing to raise taxes on corporations and wealthier Americans while also closing some tax loopholes—a plan unlikely to pass a Republican-controlled Congress.

“The president is advocating more spending, more taxes, and more debt,” said **House Budget Committee Chairman Tom Price (R-GA)** and **Senate Budget Committee Chairman Mike Enzi (R-WY)** in a [joint statement](#). “As we have seen over the past several years, that approach will yield less opportunity for the middle class and a crushing burden of debt that threatens both our future prosperity and our national security. A proposal that never balances is not a serious plan for America’s fiscal future. Especially when we have to borrow money just to afford the programs we already have. The president is required by law to submit a budget proposal. It is a suggestion and a wish list, but the budget of Congress sets the outline of spending for the coming year.”

For more information on the president’s proposed budget for the U.S. Department of Education, including proposed funding totals for every program under its jurisdiction, visit <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget16/summary/16summary.pdf>.



FIXING NCLB: Senate Education Committee Examines Federal Role in Supporting and Evaluating Teachers and Principals

The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) held a January 27 hearing, “Fixing No Child Left Behind (NCLB): Supporting Teachers and School Leaders” during which senators expressed a mutual desire to rewrite NCLB while differing on what role—if any—the federal government should play in evaluating teachers and principals.

In his [opening statement](#), **HELP Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander (R-TN)** made it clear that he wants to measure the progress of schools, as well as evaluate teachers and reward them for their performance. He also stressed that the federal government should not mandate such systems, preferring that they be developed by states and school districts.

“Given all of the great progress that states and local school districts have made on standards, accountability, tests, and teacher evaluation over the last 30 years—you’ll get a lot more progress with a lot less opposition if you leave those decisions there,” Alexander said.

Instead, Alexander would allow states to use the \$2.5 billion under Title II of NCLB to develop, implement, or improve their own teacher and principal evaluation systems.

As **U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA)** pointed out during the hearing, Alexander’s approach would also allow states and districts to use that money for other uses. “As I read the Republican draft proposal, states and districts would no longer be required to invest Title II funds in teachers and leaders,” Warren said. “Maybe it will happen sometimes, but nothing in this draft requires the states to spend a single federal tax dollar on strengthening teachers. This is a huge concern for me. We keep asking more and more and more of our teachers, but this Republican draft proposal doesn’t do a single thing to make sure that the states will actually use this federal money to help teachers do their jobs. Giving billions of dollars in federal aid to states without requiring them to spend a dime of that money on helping our teachers is not a responsible use of federal tax dollars.”

The contrast between Alexander and Warren strikes at the heart of a major difference between Republicans and Democrats in how to rewrite NCLB—whether to impose certain requirements in exchange for federal dollars or give states the flexibility to do what they want. The issue of flexibility has been a key issue for Alexander, who has charged the Obama administration with taking a “national school board” approach through the waivers it granted to states from certain requirements of NCLB.

In her [opening statement](#), **U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA)**, the top Democrat on the HELP Committee, expressed her support for evaluating teachers, but she stressed that any evaluation system must include factors in addition to test scores in determining a teacher’s effectiveness. Murray also called for better pay for teachers, high-quality professional development, clear pathways for teachers to advance and grow in their careers, and recruitment and retention practices that would ensure that the most successful teachers are teaching the students more in need.

“Democrats and Republicans should be able to work together on something as important as making sure students have great teachers—and can access high-quality education, no matter where they live, how they learn, or how much money their parents make,” Murray said.

Witnesses who testified during the hearing were **Dan Goldhaber, director of the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research at the American Institutes for Research; Terry Holliday, Kentucky Commissioner of Education; Saul Hinojosa, Superintendent of Somerset Independent School District (Texas); Rachelle Moore, a first grade teacher at Madrona K–8 School (Washington); and Christine Handy-Collins, principal of Gaithersburg High School (Maryland)**. Witness testimony and an archived video of the hearing are available at <http://1.usa.gov/1tRMFf2>.

In the next step in the process the Senate HELP Committee will conduct a roundtable-style hearing on February 3 on how innovation can better meet the needs of students. A list of witnesses and video of the hearing will be available at <http://1.usa.gov/1wTqRut>.

Looking further ahead, Alexander told [Education Week](#) that he expects the HELP Committee to finish its work to rewrite NCLB by March but is less certain when it could receive consideration on the Senate floor.

On February 4, the House Committee on Education and the Workforce will hold its first hearing on NCLB, titled “[Expanding Opportunity in America’s Schools and Workplaces](#).” During a [January 22 speech at the American Enterprise Institute](#), **Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline (R-MN)** outlined his priorities for fixing NCLB, and like Alexander, focused on shifting more responsibility to states and districts while providing additional flexibility in how they use federal funds.

Kline discussed his Student Success Act, which passed the U.S. House of Representatives last year and would have rewritten NCLB to permit states to develop their own accountability systems free of federal oversight. The Student Success Act It would also have eliminated more than seventy existing elementary and secondary education programs, including the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy program, in favor of a Local Academic Flexible grant, which Kline said would give districts “maximum funding flexibility to support local efforts to increase student achievement.”

Both **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan** and House Democrats opposed the Student Success Act last year, with Duncan calling it a “[retreat from high standards for all students](#)” that would “virtually eliminate accountability for the learning of historically underserved students—a huge step backward for efforts to improve academic achievement. Duncan added that it would “lock in major cuts to education funding at a time when continued investments in education are the only way we can remain competitive on the world stage.”



ACCOUNTING FOR WHAT MATTERS: New Alliance Report Says Data Dashboard Systems Provide Schools and Districts with Accurate, Useful Measures of School Performance by Using a Broader Range of Indicators

As Congress works to rewrite the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and improve accountability systems for public schools across the country, *Data Dashboards: Accounting for What Matters*—a new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education—highlights how going beyond a test score when assessing achievement in schools and districts provides more transparent and precise ways to continuously track performance, monitor accountability, and ensure the most at-risk students are not lost in the numbers.

“Think of data dashboards like an automobile dashboard,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Rather than providing a single number like a test score to show whether a school is succeeding or not, data dashboards provide an array of information about school performance and practices, enabling educators to quickly identify and address areas in need of improvement.”

Data dashboards are based on the idea that numerous individual performance indicators, such as academic achievement and leadership, correct the shortcomings of accountability systems that rely on a single test score or combine indicators into a difficult-to-interpret index.

“This is about more effective accountability and improvement, and there is an important federal role,” Wise said. “Data dashboards provide the opportunity to review a wide range of data for all students, especially those who have traditionally been underserved. Most important, data dashboards call educators and others to action in response to student needs. This notion of requiring support and intervention in response to student data must be incorporated into the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), but it is currently lacking in **Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander’s (R-TN)** discussion draft.”

The U.S. Department of Education granted forty-three states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico flexibility from key provisions under NCLB (known as “ESEA waivers,”) and a number of states are heading in the right direction, according to the report. States such as Georgia and Kentucky are including more indicators of school performance within their accountability systems. Still, the report notes a majority of waiver states are using an index rather than a dashboard which may limit the effectiveness of their efforts.

States such as California, which requires districts to measure school performance among eight dimensions, and districts such as Monroe County, Georgia, where performance is measured on more than seventy indicators, are among the very few assessment systems that account for two crucial indicators: (1) measures of college and career readiness and (2) the performance of student subgroups. An appendix included with the report notes that only five states that have received an ESEA waiver and are using an index include indicators for college and career readiness. In addition, seventeen states with indices only consider the performance of traditionally underserved students within one indicator of their index. Data dashboards would help address these issues, the report argues.

The report also offers policy recommendations to help states and districts to develop data dashboards that provide the right indicators for their students and teachers and set realistic goals once indicators are in place.

Data Dashboards: Accounting for What Matters is available at <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/DataDashboards/>.



STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESSES: Governors Outline Plans to Improve Education Equity

In their annual state of the state addresses that began last month, many governors shared the sentiment that education is the great equalizer. A good education, they say, is the one thing that can pull students out of struggling situations.

Colorado: Gov. Hickenlooper Sets Future Goals for Postsecondary Education Graduates

During his [January 15 state of the state speech](#), **Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper (D)** identified “targeted workforce development” and “a strong education system” as keys to supporting a strong middle class. He noted that the Colorado Commission on Higher Education set a goal of 66 percent of twenty-five- to thirty-five-year-olds holding postsecondary credentials by 2025, and added his own goal of reaching 55 percent by 2020. To help the state meet that

goal, Hickenlooper proposed a \$480 million increase for K–12 funding and an additional \$107 million for higher education.

Hickenlooper said reaching the state’s postsecondary goals means “[confronting] the truth about whether Colorado’s kids are getting the education they need to compete and succeed in the job market.” He favors “easing the testing demands” on high school seniors in social studies and science and “streamlining” tests in early years, but he said maintaining consistent assessments in English and math through high school is “fundamental.”

He said that increasing recruitment and retention for teachers is also key to improving post-secondary numbers in Colorado. Hickenlooper noted that state officials await the final education recommendations from the [1202 Task Force](#), a group of experts who met in July 2014 to discuss how best to use assessments, especially in high school.

Delaware: Gov. Markell Outlines New Initiative—“Delaware Promise”

In his [January 22 state of the state address](#), **Delaware Gov. Jack Markell (D)** asked state legislators, schools, colleges, and businesses to commit to his new plan, the “Delaware Promise,” aimed at improving the job market through education initiatives. The plan’s the ultimate goals of having 65 percent of Delaware’s workforce earn a college degree or professional certificate and 100 percent earn a high school diploma. Though Delaware has seen its high school graduation rates increasing in recent years, Markell said the state’s changing economy calls for an expansion of the workforce and restructuring of skilled training.

“Today’s jobs do not look like those of decades past,” Markell said. “Few high school graduates can count on a good-paying factory job or a stable career with benefits and a comfortable pension. Manufacturing jobs created today—building fuel cells, airplane parts, and other high-tech products—require a much higher skill level than the jobs of generations past.”

Markell’s Delaware Promise includes three components. First, the state will introduce a Pathways to Prosperity initiative establishing partnerships between employers, colleges and universities, and K–12 schools that will provide high school students with “hundreds of hours of specialized instruction and hands-on training” and allow students to graduate with industry-recognized certificates and college credits. Markell plans to launch pathways for information technology (IT) and hospitality industries this fall and expand into financial services and healthcare the following year.

Next, Markell proposed a partnership with Delaware Technical Community College and McKinsey, a consulting firm, to accelerate the training of entry-level health-care workers that will have them ready for the field in months instead of years.

Lastly, the Delaware Promise will create education programs and a coding school starting this fall to give eight major IT employers in the state the chance to properly train people in the field at an accelerated rate.

“We know that the education we received years ago will not be enough to prepare students to thrive in our new economy,” Markell said. “So we’re making investments and improvements across our education system.”

New Mexico: Gov. Martinez Aims to Prevent Truancy, Prevent Dropouts

Calling truancy a “cancer” in the state’s schools, **New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez (R)** used her [January 20 state of the state address](#) to outline several proposals to keep students in school and engaged.

“If education is the key to a brighter future for our children, then we must have the courage to demand that our kids are in their seats and learning,” Martinez said. “Today’s habitually truant kids are indeed tomorrow’s dropouts. It is our collective problem. And we know who the at-risk kids are; teachers say they can spot them a mile away—detached, behavior issues, lack of interest in school and their peers.”

A prosecutor for twenty-five years, Martinez brings to the table a wealth of personal experience on the issue. Among the ideas she offered were putting social workers on middle school campuses and hiring dropout prevention coaches for high schools whose “sole purpose” is to make sure that students receive a diploma. She also called for legislation preventing habitually truant students to obtain or keep a driver’s license.

At the same time, Martinez sought to target problems in the earlier grades, such as poor reading skills and social promotion, that she said lead to truancy. “How did many troubled students end up that way—uninterested in school, dropping out, perhaps engaging in criminal activity, achieving far lower than their potential?” she asked. “When children cannot read, and yet they are passed along anyway, we do them no favors. We discourage them. We frustrate them. We hurt their chances for success in life. We hamper their ability to get a good job.”

Martinez noted that the state had doubled pre-K funding since she became governor and said she would propose more funding in 2015. She also mentioned the state’s K–3 Plus program, which provides at least twenty-five additional instructional days before the school year, begins for disadvantaged students in kindergarten through third grade.

“I firmly believe that education is the road that will lead out of poverty for each New Mexico child, for each struggling family, and for our state as a whole,” Martinez said. “Why do I believe that? Because education is what plants the seeds of wonder, of curiosity, of excitement in a child; points them to opportunities and goals, inspires dreams about careers, and about better days; gives them hope that today’s circumstances do not have to be tomorrow’s circumstances.”

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](https://twitter.com/all4ed)), Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).