

The Poverty Forum: Education

Setting Education Expectations for All Children

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Area: Education

Issue:

Nearly half of the low-income students in this country never graduate from high school, much less attend and successfully complete some form of postsecondary education. As a nation we must focus our attention and resources, setting the expectation that all children have these opportunities.

Problem:

The nationwide high school graduation rate hovers around 70%, while the rates for African-American, Hispanic and low-income students are all less than 60%. Nearly half of the most vulnerable children in our nation never graduate from high school at all. In addition, the gap in reading skills between white and minority 17 year olds is wider than it was in 1990.

According to the Education Equality Project, these “academic outcomes translate into life outcomes: dropouts are more likely to become and stay jobless, will enjoy dramatically lower lifetime earnings, are far more likely to be unemployed and incarcerated, are more likely to depend upon public assistance, and face more serious health problems and shorter life expectancies.”

Additionally, postsecondary education was long seen as the privilege of a select few. This is no longer true in today's economy. With unemployment topping 7.2 percent, only the most educated will find new jobs quickly – if at all. At the same time, over two-thirds of new jobs being created require college education or advanced training. Even jobs that are considered “blue collar” such as electricians now require some sort of postsecondary credential or training. And while college attendance has increased among all segments of the population since the 1970s, large gaps in participation between affluent and low-income students stubbornly persist.

Demographics make the challenge of expanding access to postsecondary education even more challenging. According to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) in 2004-05, students of color represented slightly more than 1/3 of all students graduating from high school. But by 2020-21, they will represent nearly half of all high school graduates. These are the same students who will require additional assistance – both financial and supportive - to get into and out of a post secondary course of study.

Policy Recommendations:

1) High School Graduation Fund: The Federal Government should create an incentive fund for schools districts to implement innovative programs designed to significantly increase high school graduation rates. This incentive fund would provide funding plus waivers from Federal restrictions that hinder or impede implementation of innovative models. In exchange, school districts would be required to show:

1. approval and cooperation of their State Education Agency, a foundation or private sector philanthropic organization, an institute of higher education, parents affected by the changes, and the community at large;
2. that the reforms they intend to implement are school-wide programs and include activities such as: accelerated academic catch up, college preparatory curriculum, early warning systems that track indicators such as absenteeism, comprehensive college guidance/ student advisement, parental involvement, experiential job-based learning, access to dual credit, and teacher professional development; and
3. that the reforms they intend to implement are evidence-based.

Previous Legislation: There is significant interest in Congress in addressing the high school dropout issue. Several pieces of legislations were introduced in the 110th Congress and were incorporated into Committee work on NCLB reauthorization. Most of the bills created a federal funding stream dedicated to preventing high school dropouts. Key supporters of dropout prevention legislation include Rep. Bobby Scott (D-VA) and Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) and Sen. Richard Burr (R-NC).

Political Outlook: There is a strong possibility that the new Administration and Congress will address the high school dropout issue in the 111th Congress. During the campaign, President Obama spoke about supporting high schools and addressing the dropout crises by investing in interventions in middle schools. In addition, the relevant authorizing committees have been working on NCLB reauthorization for the past two years. It is unclear if a high school bill would move separately or as part of the broader reauthorization.

References for more Information:

Alliance for Excellent Education - <http://www.all4ed.org/files/Legislation.pdf>

The Education Equality Project - <http://www.educationequalityproject.org/>

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation - <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/topics/Pages/high-schools.aspx>

2) Education Savings Program: The Federal Government should establish a college savings program designed to increase college attendance and success among low-income students. In addition to providing financial assistance for a post secondary education for low-income students, these accounts could also significantly impact a parent's expectations of their child's ability to attend college. While most middle-class and high-income families view college as a right of passage, for low-income families it is too often seen as an impossible dream. There is evidence that suggests that setting an expectation for college early helps students achieve that dream.

A program of this sort would:

1. Establish a savings account for every young person who would be eligible for a Pell Grant according to their parents' most recent tax return or based on their eligibility for other means-tested federal income support programs.
2. The Federal Government would deposit an amount into the account each year that would be based on the family's Pell eligibility. For example, if a student would be eligible for a \$5,000 Pell Grant, the government could deposit 10%, or \$500, into the account annually.
3. The families, employers, or non-profit organizations could also deposit money into these accounts.
4. The families for whom these accounts are created would receive an annual statement showing the growth of the fund over the years and reinforcing the expectation that their child can attend college.
5. These accounts could only be used for college expenses and could not be withdrawn for other purposes.

Previous Legislation (if applicable): Not applicable

Political Outlook: During the past several years, Congress has passed several pieces of legislation dealing with Higher Education financing, including a reconciliation bill that increased the amount of the Pell Grant and created merit-based scholarships for low-income students. In addition, Congress passed a reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) that was signed into law in 2008. The reauthorization is intended to extend these higher education programs for five years. Due to the controversial and costly policies involved it took Congress several years to agree on a bill and the previous reauthorization remained in effect for 10 years.

However, Congress and the new Administration talk about college costs frequently as an important issue and recently Congressional committees have indicated that college aid simplification is a legislative priority for the 111th Congress.

References for more Information:

Rethinking Student Aid study group and report: <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/policy-advocacy/affordability/student-aid>