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Education Aid Caught in Budget Debate Crossfire

By Alyson Klei

As Congress faces an April 8 deadline to come up with a spending bill for the rest of the federal fiscal year, education advocates, states, and school districts remain anxious about what—and how much—may end up being cut from K-12 aid in any final deal.

Congressional GOP leaders and the Obama administration have shown sharply contrasting views on education spending throughout the current budget drama, which so far has resulted in six stopgap spending measures and billions of dollars in cuts, including \$750 million from the U.S. Department of Education's discretionary budget.

The Republican-controlled House of Representatives wants to see significantly deeper long-term cuts across a range of discretionary programs, including in K-12 education, in a bill financing the government for the remainder of the fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30.

President Barack Obama—who called for freezing overall domestic spending in his recent fiscal 2012 budget request, but targeted education for a modest increase—pledged in a recent speech that he would not accept further education cuts, while stopping short of an actual veto threat.

For now, observers say the parameters of a longer-term budget agreement are hazy.

"It's really doom and gloom out there right now," said Jennifer Cohen, a senior policy analyst at the Federal Education Budget Project at the New America Foundation, a Washington think tank.

Chopping Block

The vulnerability of education funding was clearly demonstrated in the stopgap measure signed into law March 2, which eliminated money for high-profile programs such as the \$250 million Striving Readers program, the \$67 million Even Start Family Literacy program, and the \$88 million Smaller Learning Communities program. ("**Budget Cuts Raise Questions About Federal Commitment to Literacy**," March, 16, 2011.)

The most recent extension of government funding, approved March 17, did not restore the support for those programs, and it made one new education-related cut: a \$125 million career-pathways program in the U.S. Department of Labor.

Still, the House GOP's longer-range intention appears clear: The budget bill passed by the House in February and later defeated in the Democratic-controlled Senate would have cut more than \$5 billion from

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the Education Department, as well as \$1 billion from Head Start, the federal preschool program for low-income children, operated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Presidential Pledge

For his part, President Obama said in a March 14 speech that he would not allow further cuts to education spending, likening his approach to that of an ordinary family in trying to balance the household budget—the last area they would cut is their children’s college fund, he said.

“A budget that sacrifices our commitment to education would be a budget that’s sacrificing our country’s future,” President Obama told an audience at Kenmore Middle School in Arlington, Va. “That would be a budget that sacrifices our children’s future. And I will not let it happen. ... I’m not willing to tell these young people right here that their education isn’t a priority.”

Senate Democrats are also pledging to resist further cuts to K-12.

“Cutting funding for education is the wrong way to address our deficit problems. It would shortchange our nation’s youth, kill jobs and hurt our economic future,” Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, the chairman of the subcommittee that oversees K-12 spending, said in an e-mailed statement. “Instead, we need a budget that balances selected spending cuts with fair revenue increases.”

But Andrew J. Coulson, the director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, in Washington, said that even the cuts proposed by the House don’t go far enough.

“Federal spending doesn’t provide better education,” he said. “The federal government could easily, and should, cut almost all spending on K-12.” That’s unlikely to happen, he said, because even smaller-scale cuts are politically difficult.

Consolidation Proposal

Still, a number of smaller education programs are on shaky footing, including the \$100 million Educational Technology State Grants. That initiative was slated for consolidation in the administration’s 2011 and 2012 budget requests—both of which sought to combine 38 smaller programs into 11 broader funding streams. It was also slated for elimination under a defeated Senate Democratic fiscal 2011 spending plan. (“[Obama Seeks to Shelter Education in 2012 Budget](#),” February 14, 2011.)

Other programs slated for consolidation under the president’s budget are also likely to face increased scrutiny from lawmakers looking for cuts, including the \$19 million Literacy Through School Libraries program and the \$119 million Teaching American History program.

The consolidation proposal may have made certain programs appear vulnerable, even though that wasn’t the administration’s intent, Ms. Cohen of the New America Foundation said.

“By sheer action of putting a zero” in the current-year column for those programs “they sort of gave the Republicans implicit license to cut,” she said.

And Ms. Cohen said that prospects are increasing dim when it comes to additional funding for the administration’s signature education redesign programs: the Race to the Top and Investing in Innovation competitive-grant programs. The administration had sought to extend both programs, which are being financed with economic-stimulus money, for an additional year.

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Even as the clock ticks on the latest stopgap measure, lawmakers still have the option of either passing a spending bill for the rest of the fiscal year, or passing yet another short-term extension.

But neither the Obama administration nor congressional leadership on either side of the aisle favor another stopgap measure.

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