

House on K-12: No Money, Some Bipartisanship, Lots to Learn

By [Alyson Klein](#) on February 10, 2011 8:36 PM | [No comments](#) | [No recommendations](#)

Three things were obvious after the new GOPed-up House education committee held its first hearing on education:

1) **No more money:** Just in case the message hasn't gotten through, school districts should know that the new Republicans in Congress really don't think that more money equals better student outcomes. The most popular item at the hearing today? A [chart](#) by the Cato Institute's Andrew Coulson essentially saying that the federal government has spent \$2 trillion over the past half century, with nothing to show for it in terms of student results.

Coulson said that, in his view, there isn't a single federal program that has actually made a difference in student achievement, except for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program. (Sorry Race to the Top [fans!](#))

Tony Bennett, Indiana's superintendent of public instruction, also made the point that school spending in his state hasn't correlated with achievement. In fact, Indiana has shown growth in scores when spending has been cut, he said.

"We've never married fiscal policy and education policy," he said.

2) **There's potential for bipartisanship, to a point:** Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., the new chairman of the committee, joked at the start of the hearing that he and Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., the ranking member, could have exchanged opening statements—which is sort of true.

Here's [Kline](#): "State and local communities are moving forward with innovative solutions to improve accountability, parent involvement, results-based hiring, and school choice. Washington should not stand in the way of these and other meaningful reforms that improve the quality of education for our children."

And here's [Miller](#): "We must give greater flexibility at the local level in exchange for setting high goals for all children and less prescription at the federal level." But Kline had a lot about cracking down on spending in his speech, and Miller not so much.

Kline told reporters in an interview after the hearing that he saw the four witnesses—including Ted Mitchell, the president of the NewSchools Venture Fund—nodding in unison. Mitchell was the witness chosen by the Democrats.

The big, overall consensus? The feds need to set high goals and then get out of the way and let states and districts figure out how to reach them. (For those nerds who follow edu-think-tankland, that's basically the Fordham Institute's ["reform realism."](#))

Bennett may have summed it up best: "The federal role is just to say that states have done a good job setting their standards. Set the bar high. If we don't do the job, don't give us the money, ... and please get out of our way." Bennett even acknowledged state leaders' role in keeping standards low: "It's folks like me that haven't held up their end of the bargain."

Mitchell also specified a few areas where he thinks there is a smart role for the federal government, such as tracking results for student groups that are often overlooked (like English-language learners and students in special education) and investing in programs that encourage innovation, such as charter schools. Providing incentive grants for innovation gives reformers political cover, he said.

The big fly in all this happy bipartisan ointment? We already knew that reform-minded Democrats like Mitchell, and pragmatic Republicans, like Indiana's Bennett, would probably have little trouble finding some common ground, at least when it comes to the big picture. But there wasn't anyone at the witness table representing the traditional Democratic (re: union, practitioner) stance on ESEA. Their support may not matter as much in the House, but it will in the Senate, for sure.

3) The new GOP members are open minded, but they're still learning the ropes:

There were questions on issues like teacher retention, and even whether school districts can save money and boost student achievement by cutting back transportation costs and making more parents drive their kids to school. But there were very few questions from the freshmen on aspects of the administration's blueprint for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or programs like Race to the Top.

A case in point, I got a chance to interview Rep. Larry Bucshon, R-Ind., an honest-to-goodness heart surgeon, during the hearing. He told me he was still getting up to speed on aspects of the law, like the requirement to test students in grades 3 through 8, and the idea of teacher effectiveness. But his bottom-line philosophy, which most of his colleagues seem to share, is that while the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act are admirable, "education should be locally driven and state driven."

Other tidbits:

Miller tipped his hand on a key issue, saying that Congress is almost certain to address evaluation in the reauthorization of ESEA.

Rep. Glenn Thompson, R-Pa., opened what could be a huge can of worms, asking about the Title I funding formula, which he said shortchanges rural schools.

Not everyone is in love with the current formula, which some say creates big losers in rural communities, favoring instead heavily populated areas with concentrations of poverty (including districts with lots of wealthy residents, like Montgomery County, Md.) The [Rural School and Community Trust](#) and the [Center for American Progress](#) are both pressing for changes. And Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C., a key moderate, has [talked about](#) moving to rework the formula.

The problem? Any proposed change will set up regional fights that are likely to delay reauthorization, possibly for years.

Dying for more? There's a webcast [here](#)—don't forget the popcorn!