

AAG Washington Monitor

Pell Grants, NCLB Positioned Well in Budget Debate

On February 26, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings appeared before a House Appropriations Subcommittee to defend her portion of the Bush Administration's final federal budget proposal. While Spellings found agreement with panel members on a few initiatives, she was also lambasted by Republicans and Democrats alike.

Much of Spellings' testimony focused on funding for programs that relate to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) – better known under President Bush as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Specifically, the Secretary promoted the Administration's plan to allocate \$500 million for school improvement grants, \$406 million for high-poverty schools, and \$200 million for a program aimed at attracting high-quality teachers to jobs in underperforming schools.

Sue Quantius, a staffer for the Subcommittee's Democratic Majority, stated publicly on March 3 that there is a good deal of momentum behind the added spending on NCLB programs, given that the law will

soon be reauthorized. But several panel members have criticized other aspects of the budget proposal, including the elimination of 27 small-to-medium-sized Department of Education programs favored by Congress. Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) went so far as to tell Spellings, "I'm glad this is (your) last budget... (it) shows no understanding of the federal role in education." And in asserting that the Administration has ignored educational investments in Native American communities, Rep. Dennis Rehberg (R-MT) said, "I don't know what you guys are smoking over there, but it just ain't working."

In defending the proposal before the skeptical House members, Spellings pointed out that Pell Grant awards (a type of federal postsecondary assistance based on financial need) are raised to a maximum \$4,800 for FY 2009 – the highest in the program's history. Quantius has emphasized strong Subcommittee support for this boost – and Pell Grants have played a key role as Congress has debated the Higher Education Act reauthorization in recent months.

As Congress continues its work on the budget, it remains to be seen whether the

Democratic majority will work to reach a compromise on spending with President Bush before he leaves office or if they will try to push off final decisions until after the January 20, 2009 inauguration. Regardless, additional dollars in the ESEA pot could be of benefit to our community once the law is finally reauthorized – especially given the AAG's work to push for greater attention to geography education funding as part of the NCLB's revised framework.

Emergency Supplemental Bill for ACI?

There has been some chatter in Washington that Congress should consider an emergency supplemental appropriations bill for programs related to the American Competitiveness Initiative (ACI). The ACI includes significant increases in research funding at the National Science Foundation and other agencies and has widespread bipartisan support. ■

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