



NEWS ANALYSIS

Stimulus plan critical for school budgets

As Congress debates the merits of a massive economic stimulus package, school leaders are wondering if a huge influx of needed funds will come their way soon.

The nuts and bolts of President Obama's \$825 billion "American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009" still were being worked out at press time. But amid the expected partisan sniping and anticipated compromises between the House and Senate, school officials across the country were looking at a potential windfall of

\$80 billion to \$120 billion.

And the money could not come at a better time, as cash-strapped school districts across the U.S. face large and larger cuts in spending to balance their budgets. More than 70 percent of school leaders expect they will have to eliminate positions in the next budget cycle, according to a mid-January survey by the American Association of School Administrators, and programs across the board are in danger of being cut.

Already, districts have moved to

four-day school weeks and redirected funding to pay increased utility bills. School construction projects that are "shovel ready" have been delayed. In the Miami-Dade County Schools, officials have cut almost \$280 million from the budget and are looking to find another \$100 million.

"This has become, in my opinion, an economic development problem because we are endangering the preparation of the workforce," Superintendent Alberto Carvalho told *USA Today*. "We're well past cutting through the fat, through the flesh, muscle. We're now sawing into bone."

Obama's stimulus package, school leaders believe, could go a long way to alleviate that pain. "We are greatly encouraged by the proposed investment," said Anne Bryant, executive director of the National School Boards Associations. "This legislation could not come at a more critical time."

About \$20 billion would be spent to build and renovate schools as part of the plan to improve job creation and growth. States would get at least \$39 billion to blunt potential midyear and 2009-10 cuts in education spending.

"The states are in terrible fiscal budget crisis now," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in late January, "and part of it, what we do for children's health, education, and some of those elements, are to help the states meet their financial needs."

Also encouraging is the plan to allocate \$26 billion into two chronically underfunded federal programs: No Child Left Behind and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The proposal, if it goes through without cuts to those two areas, would represent the first effort to fully fund NCLB since it passed in 2001.

John Boehner, the Republican Ohio congressman and former chairman of the House education committee, said he is concerned about the overall size of the plan. While Boehner has not

specifically addressed the plan's education components, he has been against large increases in funding for NCLB and IDEA.

"Right now, given the concerns that we have over the size of this package and all of the spending in this package, we don't think it's going to work," Boehner said before the House vote at the end of January. "If it's the plan that I see today, put me down in the no column."

Boehner and other congressional Republicans are concerned that, if the plan goes through as it was proposed following Obama's Jan. 20 inauguration, Congress will be hard-pressed to make subsequent cuts in spending. But George Miller, the California Democrat

who currently chairs the House education committee, told the Associated Press that the time to act is now.

"At the moment, my interest is in rebuilding the economy," Miller said. "It's clearly not in the national interest to have this system collapse at this moment in time."

Glenn Cook, Editor-in-Chief

Coming in April

In the April issue, *ASBJ* will kick off a three-month "Money" series with stories on districts in three states hardest hit by the recession: California, Florida, and Michigan. The series also will look at how the recession is affecting construction, employee pensions, staffing, and other issues critical to school leaders.

District eliminates grade levels

A Colorado school district has decided to eliminate grade levels and group its 10,000 students based on what they know, a move that a consultant says could be "a lighthouse for America's challenged school districts."

The standards-based model, now in use in some Alaska districts, gives students in the Adams 50 School District an opportunity to advance to the next level when they prove proficiency. The district, which has been on academic watch for two years due to low student achievement, is in a suburb just north of Denver.

"If they can pull this off," consultant Richard DeLorenzo told the *Denver Post*, "it will change the face of American education."

Less than 60 percent of the district's students, two-thirds of whom are Latino, currently graduate on time. Superintendent Roberta Selleck said the new system will have 10 levels instead of the traditional 13 now found in districts.

"What we are doing right now is not working," Selleck said. "We think this will be huge."

Under the plan, students will be tested in the spring to determine their level of proficiency in three areas: reading, writing, and math. Peers who are learning at the same level will be grouped started in the 2009-10 school year.

"In a standards-based system, time becomes the variable and learning is the constant," Selleck told the *Post*. "When a kid can demonstrate proficiency of a standard, they move on. There is nothing magical about a quarter, semester, or the end of school. That becomes blurred. Learning becomes much more 24-7."

DeLorenzo first met with Adams 50 officials after he made a speech at a Colorado Association of School Boards retreat. He helped implement a similar system in Alaska's 200-student Chugach School District, where 90 percent of students couldn't read at grade level. Today, they score in the upper one-third of all students in the state.

Readers were not shy about sharing their opinions of Editor-in-Chief Glenn Cook's column, "History, Legacy, and Lincoln," that appeared at the start of the February issue.



Appearing just after the inauguration, the column outlined parallels Cook saw between Abraham Lincoln and President Obama in the context of a play Cook's son is performing in at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. The play, "The Heavens Are Hung in Black," tells the story of the hardest year of Lincoln's life.

Here is a sampling of the large number of reader views we received:

■ "I look forward to your next month's article, and how President Obama will lead our nation. He certainly is in my prayers. I am also pleased with the wonderful opportunities your son has, but even more so his compassion. The next generation will need to be stronger and more compassionate."

■ "I have read so many books on Lincoln ... I live in Illinois and Obama is NOTHING LIKE LINCOLN. You should get your facts straight."

■ "Obama's supporters would love for him to be Lincoln and apparently believe that if they say it enough it will be accepted as fact. The 'Team of Rivals' analogy to Obama's cabinet is driven to anyone who knows the history of Lincoln's era. How about if we let Obama accomplish something before we begin comparing him to our great-president?"

■ "I want to tell you how much I appreciated your account of your conversations with your son about Lincoln. I just returned from the inauguration with my 22-year-old son and I know we both agree that we need someone like Lincoln now! And we also believe that we have found that person in Barack Obama."

Talk About It

Our monthly list of topics worth discussing



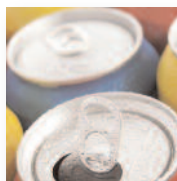
Alternative P.E.

Call it the alternative P.E. On campuses such as West Babylon High School in New York state, students are dancing to hip-hop music, running on treadmills, and riding stationary bicycles as part of the physical education program. West Babylon is one of a number of districts that is moving away from team sports to help students become more enthusiastic about lifelong fitness. Some schools are incorporating yoga, Pilates, and video games that require physical activity to reduce the obesity rate.

Competency controversy

Should high school students be required to pass tests to get a diploma? A proposal by Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell to add high school competency exams in four subjects—math, science, English, and social studies—is expected to result in a huge battle as the state faces severe budget restrictions. Rendell's proposal would require students to pass six of 10 tests, including at least one in each of the four areas, to

receive a diploma starting in 2014. However, House and Senate Republicans aren't convinced the program is necessary, especially in tight budget times.



Eliminate junk food?

The Iowa Board of Education is considering a proposal to ban soda, French fries, and other junk food from schools in 2009-10 as part of a plan to reduce childhood obesity and improve student health. The move, which has been mirrored in some states and school districts, is part of a 2008 state law that emphasizes more exercise and cardiopulmonary resuscitation classes in schools.

Gifted 'Labelgate'

Maryland's Montgomery County Schools is debating whether to end the long-standing practice of labeling students as "gifted" starting in second grade. The school board is expected to take up the issue, which was dubbed "Labelgate" and ignited a firestorm in the local gifted and talented community, later this year. Since the 1970s, the district has screened each student for potential giftedness, starting in second grade. Cognitive testing and several other factors, including schoolwork and teacher/parent recommendations, are used in deciding whether to label a child. The label is then

placed in the child's permanent record.

Junior 4-K

Thirty-seven Wisconsin school districts have started offering junior kindergarten, aka 4-K, a free education program for 4-year-olds. More than 75 percent of the state's 319 districts offer the program, which is designed to give younger students the academic and social skills they need to be successful later in school. One reason for the program's growth: Declining enrollments have freed up classroom space in many schools.

Juvenile crime

Even though murder rates are far below the record highs of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the numbers among African-American teens has climbed by more than 30 percent since 2000, a report says. The increase coincided with an increase in the number of murders involving guns, says Northeastern University professor James Alan Fox, one of the report's co-authors. Cutbacks in federal support of after-school programs, especially in urban areas, and a rise in gang activity in midsize and large cities is blamed.

More kids at conferences

More students are participating in parent-teacher conferences, providing their perspective and often leading the meetings. This is especially true at Tefft Middle School in Streamwood, Ill., a Chicago suburb where 525 students attended parent-teacher conferences last fall. Patti Kinney of the National Association of Secondary School Principals told the *New York Times*

Twin Rivers leaders on video

What is happening in California's Twin Rivers Unified School District? How is the merger of four former school districts into one progressing? Check out a new vodcast posted at www.nsba.org/natwinrivers that features an interview with Superintendent Frank Porter and board Chairwoman Michelle Rivas. You also can view stories and get additional materials on the consolidation process at our website—www.asbj.com.

that student participation in the conferences has become more popular because of demographic shifts in public schools. "I think we're learning that every school has its own DNA, and there is not a prescription for conferences that works for every school," she said. "There is such an increasingly diverse population at our nation's schools, the one-size-fits-all model conference just doesn't work anymore."

No money, no national board

The number of Florida teachers pursuing national board certification has dropped dramatically after legislators refused to spend money on training and bonuses. Only about 400 teachers in the state are seeking the certification in 2009; more than 1,800 received it last year when the state paid 90 percent of the \$2,500 fee to enter the program. The state also offered a 10 percent pay bonus for certified teachers, along with another 10 percent for those who agreed to mentor others, but dropped the mentor bonus due to budget woes.

The Obama effect

President Obama's rise to the nation's highest office appears to have inspired American students, especially African-Americans, in the classroom. Researchers say that a performance gap between African-American and white students all but disappeared when a 20-question test was administered before and after his nomination and election. Ray Friedman, a management professor at Vanderbilt University and one of the study's three authors, told the *New York Times* that the so-called Obama effect came as a surprise. "Obama is obviously inspirational, but we wondered whether he would contribute to an improvement in something as important as black test-taking," Friedman said. "We were skeptical that we would find any effect, but our results surprised us."



Portable music at school

What is your policy on students using iPods at school? In the Milwaukee suburbs, outright bans appear to be easing somewhat. Wisconsin state law prohibits "two-way communication devices" from classrooms, but administrators at several schools now allow students to use their music players in study hall, at lunch, and in classrooms when teachers give permission. Bonnie Laugerman, principal at Arrowhead High School, told the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* that the move is one way schools can adapt to changing times. "We're clearly aware (of concerns) about social isolation, and kids tuning into themselves to the exclusion of others," Laugerman said. "But do you prevent something, or do you learn to work with it and accept to some extent that this is the world we're in now?"

SAT controversy

When high school students take the SAT this month, they have a "Score Choice" that allows them to choose which scores to send to colleges. The policy was approved by the College Board, which administers the test, with the hope of reducing student stress around the SAT and college admissions. However, according to the *New York Times*, several highly selective colleges have said they will not take part in the program, which allows students to send their best overall sitting to colleges. Students cannot mix and match scores from different times they take the test.

Single-sex schools

Single-sex schools are growing in popularity in a number of urban districts, with proponents saying the all-boy and all-girl campuses allow students to focus on learning rather than the oppo-

site sex. But groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union fear that single-gender education could be a major setback for females. That has not stopped districts such as Detroit, which has a thriving program, and Boston, which is trying to open its first single-gender schools in several decades, from promoting the effort. The U.S. Department of Education also has said single-gender schools are allowed as long as equal programs exist at coed schools.

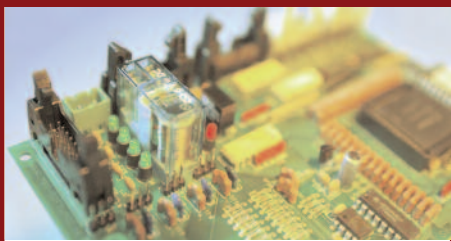


Wanted: Science teachers

Over the next decade, researchers estimate that schools will need more than 200,000 new math and science teachers. And, according to a report by the Council of Chief State School Officers, fewer than 60 percent of middle school teachers in at least 10 states are "highly qualified" in the subjects. The Knowles Science Teaching Foundation, which offers fellowships for teachers who work in math and science fields, is promoting grants that are awarded to prospective candidates in exchange for teaching in a district for at least three years.

Year-round drop-off

More than a decade after year-round schools took off, some districts have started returning to the traditional calendar. The reason, at least in Jefferson County, Ky., is not surprising. Money is cited as the key to the decision of four schools that are returning to the traditional calendar. And Superintendent Sheldon Berman wants the last two schools in the district to go back to the old way as well. "I don't believe having a year-round calendar is the most effective system out there," Berman said during a meeting covered by the *Louisville Courier-Journal*.



A new, research-based curriculum focused on cyberbullying awareness is now available for free to K-12 schools thanks to the support of four national education organizations.

The CyberSmart! Cyberbullying Package—a series of lessons based on current research findings from the fields of cybersecurity, school violence prevention, and character education—is being provided to schools thanks to a partnership between the National School Boards Association’s Technology Leadership Network, the Character Education Partnership, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the National Cyber Security Alliance.

The package of materials includes standards-based, nonsequential lessons designed to be integrated into the existing curriculum. The lessons, which support the ability of classroom teachers to enhance instruction with technology, also include materials and prevention activities that extend to families and the community at large.

To access the package, visit www.cybersmartcurriculum.org/cyberbullying.

Supreme Court takes on education cases

Over the course of a single week in January, the U.S. Supreme Court made its presence felt in cases related to private schooling for special education students, funding for English language learners (ELLs), and whether the parents of a girl can sue a school district over alleged sexual harassment by another student.

Two years after splitting 4-4 on a similar case, the court agreed to try and resolve the issue of when special education students are allowed to go private schools at taxpayer expense. In this instance, Oregon’s Forest Grove School District is asking the court to require students to give public schools a try before asking for reimbursement for private school tuition.

Earlier, a federal appeals court ordered a school district to reimburse the family of a student, known only as T.A., after he enrolled in a \$5,200-a-month private program. The case is *Forest Grove School District v. T.A.*

In the ELL cases, *Horne v. Flores* and *Arizona v. Flores*, the court agreed to decide whether the state is providing enough money for programs for students who are learning English. Previous lower court rulings said Arizona is violating a federal law that requires equal opportunities in education, but the state

superintendent and legislators believe a 2006 law has eliminated long-standing inequities in funding.

Meanwhile, in a unanimous ruling, the parents of a Massachusetts girl were granted the right to sue the Barnstable School Committee over alleged sexual harassment by another student. The case, *Fitzgerald v. Barnstable School*

Committee, involved a 5-year-old girl who was forced by an older boy to lift up her skirt or pull down her underwear during the 2000-01 school year. The girl’s parents, Lisa and Robert Fitzgerald, said school officials ignored their concerns and refused to take action against the boy, who was in third grade at the time.

The Fitzgeralds sued under Title IX, but lost their initial claim. An appeals

court refused to let them sue under an 1871 civil rights law, known as “Section 1983,” that is based on the constitution’s Equal Protection Clause.

Finally, the court also rejected a last-minute defense of the federal Child Online Protection Act, a 1998 anti-pornography law that targeted sexually explicit websites. The U.S. Department of Justice has tried to convince courts for a decade that the law was constitutional.

By refusing to take the case, the court’s decision means the law cannot be enforced. ■

