



NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION FEDERAL EDUCATION BUDGET PROJECT

A Primer on the Budget Resolution's Impact on Education Funding

Jason Delisle*

The budget resolution put forward by Congress each year—which sets out the congressional budget plan for the next five years—and the ensuing budget process itself are enormously significant for education funding. However, the arcane procedures under which Congress produces and acts upon the budget resolution are often confusing to the media and education advocates alike. This confusion is made worse by political rhetoric and partisan spin. This brief by the New America Foundation's Federal Education Budget Project is meant to shed light on how the budget resolution affects education funding.

Budget Functions and Committee Allocations

Spending recommendations for all federal programs and agencies are established under the budget resolution in 20 categories known as “budget functions,” each of which encompasses a general purpose, such as national defense or transportation. “Function 500” determines funding for the Department of Education and the education programs of other agencies. During consideration of the budget resolution, a Member of Congress wishing to increase education funding might, for example, offer an amendment to cut total spending slated for function 400 (which governs transportation) and add the amount cut to function 500.

The budget resolution and its accompanying documents only allocate overall funding to each of the 20 functions; they do not detail assumed funding levels for individual programs. In other words, the funding level for function 500 includes *assumed* spending for the Pell Grant program, but not a specific dollar amount for that program.¹ The function 500 total amount is specified, but it serves only as an aggregate limit on spending for all education programs.

After the House of Representatives and the Senate agree on a budget resolution, the agreed-upon spending levels are detailed in documents sent to the congressional committees with jurisdiction over the programs that fall under the various budget functions. These so-called “302(a) committee allocations” set the spending limits of each congressional committee for the years covered by the budget resolution.

The House and Senate Appropriations Committees fund all domestic discretionary federal programs in areas ranging from education to transportation to defense. The Appropriations Committee's 302(a) allocation is usually a source of much debate and disagreement within Congress and between Congress and the president. (Whenever a government shutdown has occurred in the past, it has been because Congress and the president could not agree on the Appropriations Committee's 302(a) allocation, which effectively stalled legislation for funding general government operations.)²

**Jason Delisle is the Research Director of the Education Policy Program at the New America Foundation. This report was prepared with the research assistance of Benjamin Miller at the New America Foundation and funded through generous grants from the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.*

How the Appropriations Committee Allocation Affects Education Funding

During consideration of the budget resolution in the House and the Senate, supporters of particular education programs typically offer amendments to increase spending for these programs—at the expense of other programs—under function 500, or they argue for an increase in the total allocation for the Appropriations Committee.³ It is at such time that members make speeches urging the passage of amendments to provide more funding for specific programs, such as grants to school districts under the No Child Left Behind Act or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. But these speeches are mostly rhetorical, since such maneuvering rarely affects program funding levels.

It is nearly impossible to influence funding for most individual education programs through changes to the function 500 total under the budget resolution, because the budget resolution governs only total spending. When a budget resolution provides for a significant increase in the total spending appropriation over the preceding year’s limit, it simply enables Congress to provide funding increases for various programs without having to reduce funding for others.

Why the Appropriations Process Matters More than the Budget Resolution

Once Congress establishes a total allocation for the budget functions that fall under the jurisdiction of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees, the committees are free to divide it up (into so-called “302(b) sub-allocations”) among subcommittees according to a majority vote of the full committee members.

For fiscal year 2009 and in a closed-door session, the full Appropriations Committee will divide among its subcommittees with general areas of jurisdiction almost \$1 trillion in spending authority. For fiscal year 2008, the Appropriations Committees allocated approximately \$150 billion to the House and Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Subcommittees, which have jurisdiction over education programs.

It is important to note that the specific amount of this sub-allocation was not discussed when the budget resolution was debated by Congress as a whole. Further, the subcommittees in the House and Senate have jurisdiction over a number of unrelated agencies and programs—those administered by the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education—and the budget resolution is silent as to how the subcommittees divide the \$150 billion among those agencies and specific programs.

In sum, efforts by Members of Congress to shift funding to or from specific education programs within the budget resolution are largely ineffective, because the only aspect of funding enforced by the budget resolution is total funding. The Appropriations Committee and its subcommittees have the sole authority to set program funding levels once total funding has been established by the budget resolution.

Fiscal Year	302(a)	House 302(b)	Senate 302(b)
2001	599.0	99.5	97.8
2002	661.3	119.7	123.4
2003	759.1*	132.2	n/a
2004	784.5	138.0	137.6
2005	814.3	142.5	142.3
2006	843.0	142.5	142.5
2007	873.0	144.8	144.8
2008	953.1	151.7	150.8

*No Congressional budget resolution was adopted for fiscal year 2003. The House “deemed” a resolution with applicable 302(a) allocation for itself. The Senate took no similar action. It operated with no 302(a) or 302(b) allocations in place for the fiscal year 2003 appropriations process.

Mandatory Funding Allocation Matters for Education

Spending totals assumed in the budget resolution for programs not funded through the annual appropriations process—mandatory spending programs—may have a more direct impact on education policies considered by Congress. Student loan programs, education-related tax benefits, such as the Hope and Lifetime Learning tax credits, and a portion of Pell Grants are the main education programs receiving mandatory funds.

Like the Appropriations Committees, authorizing committees, such as the House Committee on Education and Labor, which has jurisdiction over mandatory education spending programs, also receive 302(a) allocations when Congress adopts a budget resolution. Each authorizing committee's 302(a) allocation is determined by the assumed funding levels within the budget functions for each mandatory spending program under its jurisdiction.

Usually, an authorizing committee's 302(a) allocation reflects mandatory spending at a "baseline" level; that is, at the level of funding that would be provided absent any legislative change in an ongoing program. If, for example, no changes in student loan policies were assumed in the budget resolution for the next five years, the authorizing committee's 302(a) allocation would reflect funding levels set by current law and would allow no room for an increase in spending on student loans.

On the other hand, if Congress wished to increase funding for student loans by \$5 billion over the next five years above what is provided under current law, the funding increase would be reflected in the total for function 500 and in the Committee on Education and Labor's 302(a) allocation. Thus, the budget resolution can "make room" in a 302(a) allocation for future legislation that will increase spending.

Reserve Funds and Discretionary Cap Adjustments

Budget resolutions typically include "reserve funds" and "cap adjustments" for specific programs. For example, the fiscal year 2008 budget resolution included a reserve fund for higher education programs.⁴ Members of Congress often speak about reserve funds and cap adjustments as if they were equivalent to legislation to enact a particular policy.⁵ They are not, and they often have very little impact on federal programs, including education programs. Because the budget resolution does not include information about funding levels for any individual programs, reserve funds and cap adjustments are usually included so that Members of Congress can claim that the budget resolution addresses a particular policy issue.

However, reserve funds and cap adjustments do serve a procedural purpose. When Congress wishes to adjust a committee's 302(a) allocation upward after the budget resolution has been adopted, it can do so using a reserve fund for authorizing committees and a cap adjustment for the Appropriations Committee.⁶ For example, in 2007, when the College Cost Reduction and Access Act was considered by the Senate, a reserve fund established under the budget resolution was used to increase the 302(a) allocation to the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. This made room for the mandatory spending increases in student aid enacted by the bill for those years that were not included in the committee's 302(a) allocation when the budget resolution was adopted.⁷ The use of the reserve fund allowed the committee to remain within its 302(a) allocation and thus avoid having to confront such procedural hurdles as a Budget Enforcement Act "point of order."

Points of Order and Budget Enforcement

Decisions regarding spending, revenue, and budget processes established in the budget resolution are enforced in the House and Senate mainly through heightened legislative hurdles. A legislative “point of order” may be raised by a House or Senate member against proposed bills or amendments if they violate the spending limits established by the most recent budget resolution or other budget laws and rules.⁸

A point of order, if raised and sustained, removes a bill, amendment, or offending provision from legislative consideration. In short, it kills the proposal. In the House, points of order can be waived by a simple majority vote and therefore rarely affect the legislative process. In the Senate, some points of order can be waived with a simple majority, but most require a higher threshold to be waived, usually 60 votes. A member of the House or Senate must first raise a point of order to strike an offending provision or prevent the consideration of legislation or an amendment that violates a budget rule. Often, a point of order applies to a bill or an amendment, but no member will raise it.

A Special Note: Advance Appropriations for Education

To get around the budget resolution’s overall discretionary spending caps, Congress regularly provides partial funding for four K-12 education programs through a little understood budgeting technique called “advance appropriations.”⁹ The approach takes advantage of a timing quirk whereby the academic year (July 1 to June 31) spans two federal fiscal years (which run from October 1 to September 30). It allows Congress to partially fund education programs above the budget resolution’s 302(a) allocation for the Appropriations Committee, without affecting the receipt of funds by schools. Essentially, advance appropriations spend some of next year’s budget early. A special point of order included in the budget resolution limits the amount of advance appropriations. The limit was \$25.2 billion for fiscal year 2008.¹⁰

Advance appropriations can have a significant impact on education funding. For fiscal year 2008, Congress increased the advance appropriations limit for the first time in several years, and that increase provided for much of the total increase in funding for key K-12 education programs over the previous year.¹¹ These increases were achieved largely because President George W. Bush did not seek reductions in advances when he wrung concessions from Congress to reduce total spending for fiscal year 2008.¹² Last year’s outcome thus may encourage some in Congress to argue for further increases in the advance appropriation limit in future budget resolutions.

Budget Reconciliation

Congress may choose to include “reconciliation” instructions in the budget resolution. Reconciliation is a powerful procedural vehicle in the budget process because it enables a congressional majority to circumvent the filibuster option in the Senate. Only a majority vote is needed in the Senate to adopt a budget resolution that calls for the reconciliation process, and only a majority vote is required to adopt a reconciliation bill. In short, a reconciliation bill is filibuster-proof. The reconciliation process has been used seven times since 1990 to enact major changes in education policy.

Education Policy Changes Adopted in Reconciliation



1990

- Penalties for schools with high student loan cohort default rates

1993

- Direct Loan Program created
- Variable student loan interest rates

1997

- Changes to guaranty agencies
- New education tax benefits

2001

- New higher education tax deduction
- Increased education tax benefits

2005

- Reduced lender subsidies
- Academic Competitiveness and SMART grants created

2007

- Reduced lender subsidies
- Higher Pell Grants
- Lower borrower interest rates
- Pilot auction program

Reconciliation instructions require authorizing committees in Congress to draft legislation that would change federal mandatory spending or revenue policies by a specified amount. The instructions, however, do not specify actual changes to federal laws and programs. Committees that receive reconciliation instructions draft legislation to meet the mandatory spending or revenue changes. That legislation is then considered by the full House and Senate. The final omnibus reconciliation bill is sent to the president for his signature.

A reconciliation bill is subject to strict rules in the Senate—enforced mainly by points of order—because of its filibuster-proof status. These rules limit the scope of a reconciliation bill so that only certain policies may be considered under the expedited process. For example, the legislation considered as a reconciliation bill must meet the spending and revenue instructions in the budget resolution, it may not increase the deficit in any year beyond the scope of the budget resolution, and it may only contain provisions that are directly related to spending and revenue policies.

Conclusion

Each component of the congressional budget process can affect federal education funding in a different way. Budget functions, reserve funds, points of order, and reconciliation all play a role in shaping education policy. Unfortunately, partisan spin and political rhetoric often lead observers and stakeholders astray in their efforts to understand the various aspects of the budget resolution. This primer is intended to serve as a helpful, nonpartisan guide to the budget resolution's impact on federal education policy.

ENDNOTES

¹ The House and Senate Budget Committees maintain spreadsheets that contain itemized spending and revenue assumptions for all federal programs and policies that make up a function total. This information, however, is not disclosed. Budget resolution report language provides only a breakdown between mandatory and discretionary spending within each function.

² Kevin Kosar, “Shutdown of the Federal Government: Causes, Effects, and Process,” *Congressional Research Service*, Order Code 98-844, September 20, 2004, <http://rules.house.gov/archives/98-844.pdf>, 2.

³ If spending increases in one budget function are proposed and not offset by a spending reduction in another budget function, the total appropriations limit must be increased.

⁴ U.S. Congress, *Concurrent Resolution on the Budget for Fiscal Year 2008 Conference Report*, Report 110-153, May 16, 2007, http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110_cong_reports&docid=f:hr153.110.pdf, 30.

⁵ For example, see remarks by Sen. Robert Casey Jr. (D-PA) on the 2008 budget resolution. *Congressional Record*, 110th cong., 1st sess., 2007, S3 601-02.

⁶ Many reserve funds are “deficit-neutral reserve funds.” Such reserve funds require that tax revenue increases accompany any spending increases so that the additional spending does not increase the federal deficit.

⁷ U.S. Senate, Senator Conrad speaking on the College Cost Reduction and Access Act, *Congressional Record*, 110th cong., 1st sess., 2007, (6 September 2007): S11207.

⁸ U.S. Senate Committee on the Budget, “The Congressional Budget Process: An Explanation,” S. Prt. 105-67, 2003, 16-17.

⁹ Education programs receiving advances include No Child Left Behind Title I grants, Special Education state grants, Improving Teacher Quality grants, and Perkins Vocational Education grants.

¹⁰ U.S. Congress, *Concurrent Resolution on the Budget for Fiscal Year 2008 Conference Report*, 97-98.

¹¹ In fiscal year 2008, \$17 billion in advance appropriations were provided for education programs. In each of the prior six years, \$15 billion was provided.

¹² Peter Cohn and Martin Vaughan, “Outlook — Much Left to Do, Little Time to Do it as CR Expiration, Christmas Approach,” *CongressDaily AM*, December 10, 2007, <http://nationaljournal.com/cgi-bin/ifetch4?ENG+CONGRESS+7-cr0199+1227744-DBSCORE+256+0+61206+F+66+94+61+budget+AND+concessions+AND+PD%2f11%2f1%2f2007%2d%3e12%2f30%2f2007>.