

President Obama and Urban School Leaders Discuss NCLB and Budget

By Denisa R. Superville on March 17, 2015 8:30 AM

President Obama promised superintendents and leaders from a dozen of the nation's largest school districts that he will continue to focus on equity during his presidency and fight to continue support for the academic gains that urban school districts have made during his administration.



In a Monday meeting at the White House, Obama praised the leaders of big-city districts for the gains their students have made in recent years—in reading and math proficiency and graduation rates—and warned that Republican proposals for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the federal education budget could jeopardize that progress.

The president said that if the Republican budget, which is expected to be unveiled this week, maintains federal education spending at sequester-levels, then federal support for K-12 education would be on the same level as 2000, even adjusting for inflation.

The group of superintendents, school board members, and the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools met with Obama to discuss a host of issues important to both, including the reauthorization of ESEA; ensuring that financial resources continue to be directed

to the poorest students in the poorest districts; assessments that measure student growth; common-core standards implementation; a focus on low-performing schools, and investments in STEM, early-childhood education, and English-language learners.

The meeting, which was also attended by Education Secretary Arne Duncan, came as urban leaders were in Washington for the Council of Great City Schools' annual [legislative conference](#) and as Republicans and Democrats in Congress wrestle with the reauthorization of the ESEA.

Democrats and Republicans are still far apart on how to rewrite the federal education law, known as the No Child Left Behind Act. Democrats and urban school representatives argue that a Republican proposal that would allow Title 1 funds for low-income students to follow them wherever they choose to attend school, would take money away from districts with higher concentrations of poverty.

Monday's meeting came as [new graduation numbers](#) were released, showing that four-year graduation rates for African-American, Hispanic, English-language learners and other disadvantaged groups had increased, though they still lagged behind whites and Asian/Pacific Islanders.

Obama said that any congressional action to cut aid to schools serving those students would roll back the progress made under his administration. And, he promised "a major debate" if the principles in his budget were not reflected in a Republican budget.

"We are making too much progress now in terms of graduation rates, improved reading scores, improved math scores, increasing standards, increasing access to the resources the kids need for us to be going backwards now," he said. "And this is something worth fighting for."

That kind of language buoyed the group of urban representatives, who argued that no bill is preferable to a "bad bill."

"From our perspective, we would rather have no reauthorization at all than a bill that wrecks the momentum we have been creating," said Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council said in a statement after the meeting. "But we worry that the fragile progress we are making under the initiatives you have launched and other programs would now be put in jeopardy if anything close to the House ESEA bill emerges from Congress."

Airick West, a school board member from the Kansas City, Mo., district, who was among the representatives to meet with Obama on Monday, said he left the meeting energized by the president's willingness to exercise his veto power.

"The president made it very clear that he is prepared to veto anything that comes across his desk that damages our ability to continue the academic gains our children have earned over the past few years," West said.

"It's encouraging," he said of the president's support. "It's fashionable for [public education] to be under attack. The fact of the matter is that that data [do] not support that level of cynicism. When we look at literacy and numeracy and graduation rates, those things are on the rise."

West pointed to progress in Kansas City in the last four years, and the programs that his and other districts have put in place focusing on boosting outcomes for their students.

"We know that the strategies that we are implementing, with the support of this administration, are beginning to bear fruit," he said. "But it's something else entirely to hear a sitting president offer this level of full-throated support for the work. Clearly, we are nowhere near the finish line, but it's absolutely encouraging to have that level of support as we continue that day-to-day journey of bringing children who are dramatically behind, and clearly disadvantaged, forward..."

District of Columbia schools Chancellor Kaya Henderson, who was elected this weekend as secretary/treasurer of the Council, spoke to the president about some of the successes at DCPS, including higher graduation and proficiency rates, three straight years of increases in enrollment after nearly four decades of declining numbers, and city students' upward movement at every grade level and in every subject area on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Those improvements, she said, were possible through the administration's "commitment to equity and innovation."

Programs under this administration—including Teacher Incentive Fund grants and Race to the Top funds—have helped the district move forward with its teacher-evaluation system, its innovative teachers' union contract and performance pay system, she said.

She said the group was firm in their conversation with the president about ESEA reauthorization that "while we want to see a great bill, we'd rather see no bill than see a bad bill."

"I think there are people who are pressuring the administration to just sign any bill to show that Congress and the president can work together, but this is a leader whose legacy is around equity," she said. "This is a leader whose legacy is around ensuring that every single kid in this country has a chance at success, and signing a bill that is not the right bill could compromise that entire legacy, and so we said to him, unequivocally, 'we will fight with you, we will stand with you, we will back you and be behind you to ensure that our kids don't get shortchanged.'"

She said it "was just really amazing" to hear that the president shared those same values and reiterated them to the press after the meeting.

"I was totally blown away," she said.

The president also spoke to the urban school representatives about their progress in implementing aspects of the ["My Brother's Keeper"](#) program. The Council of the Great City Schools [pledged](#) to take specific, targeted actions—including increasing participating in Advanced Placement courses, improving graduation rates, reducing suspensions, and boosting college-going rates—for boys of color in their schools.

West, from Kansas City, said he told the president about the partnership that his district has forged with the city, the local Boys and Girls of America, and the law enforcement community.

The president, he said, stressed building community partnerships and being assertive in soliciting participation from community partners to ensure the integrity and long-term sustainability of the work around supporting boys of color, he said.

Photo Credit: President Barack Obama, sitting next to Cecilia Muñoz, Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, right, and Budget Director Shaun Donovan, meets with the Council of the Great City Schools Leadership on Monday at the White House. In the foreground at right is Richard Carranza, Superintendent of the San Francisco Unified School District.

--Jacquelyn Martin/A