

San Francisco Chronicle

OPINION

Proposed federal budget would set back urban schools' gains

By Jumoke Hinton Hodge and Michael Casserly

March 27, 2015

The nation's urban public schools are often described as troubled or in crisis, but many people don't realize that they have made enormous progress over the last 10 years. Their students' academic performance has improved. They have raised their standards and strengthened their non-instructional operations. Our urban schools still lag on many important indicators, to be sure, but the public would be encouraged by the amount of effort and innovation that is going into improvement.

Earlier this month, we had the opportunity to join other school leaders in a meeting with President Obama to discuss the successes we've seen and the challenges we face. The progress we have made is now in jeopardy as Congress considers a new budget and prepares to reauthorize the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The congressional budget jeopardizes federal investments in public education, which have not even fully recovered from prior-year budget cuts known as sequester cuts. Both the House and Senate versions of the reauthorization of the education act further freeze funds through 2021. If such levels are approved by Congress, the federal government would spend less on our schools in 2021 than in 2012.

What would that mean? In Oakland, fewer after-school opportunities and less tutoring. In Houston, the loss of nearly 120 teachers. And in Miami, the loss of \$15 million in badly needed Title I educational aid for poor children.

On top of this loss of federal funding, the House bill to renew the nation's elementary and secondary education programs allows state and local education funding to be cut without any risk of losing federal dollars. In a very counterproductive proposal called "portability," the House bill would dismantle the system by which federal funds are targeted to schools and districts with the highest concentrations of poverty, moving these scarce dollars into schools and districts with less overall need. The proposal then further dilutes funding by allowing federal funds to be used for any student within a school, or any school with as few as one poor student, thereby undercutting the original intent of Congress to concentrate federal funds where they are most needed to offset the impact of poverty on learning.

These proposals put at risk the significant gains that our urban public schools have made over the last few years. In fact, these academic gains are helping to fuel the progress that the nation in general is making. For instance, between 2003 and 2013, fourth-graders in the nation's large city schools improved their reading attainment by 33 percent on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (sometimes called the nation's report card.) In math, fourth-graders in our large city public schools improved by 63 percent over the same period. We see similar gains among eighth-graders. And movement is now evident in improving graduation rates, particularly among our African American and Hispanic students.

This progress is the result of work by a great many people at the local level who have not tolerated the low expectations to which too many of our children have been historically held. As urban educators, we did not get into this important work to see our schools reflect — much less perpetuate — the inequities that too many of our children endure. Our job is to help our children overcome barriers and to put them on the road to success.

But this largely unheralded progress is at risk if Congress begins to undermine the gains we are making, gains that our elected representatives have had a hand in creating through the investments they have made over the years. Now is not the time to back away; now is the time to double-down on behalf of all our children. So we

urge Congress to pass a good bill that addresses our concerns and invests in our children.

Jumoke Hinton Hodge is a member of the Oakland Unified School District Board.

Michael Casserly is the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, the nation's primary coalition of large urban public school systems.