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Math-Science Bills Advance in Congress

Separate measures aimed at boosting competitiveness.

By David J. Hoff and Sean Cavanagh

Improving K-12 instruction and student achievement in mathematics and science is at the heart of separate bills intended to bolster America's economic standing that won overwhelming approval in both houses of Congress last week.

The omnibus bills include efforts to increase the content knowledge of prospective math and science teachers, provide professional development for teachers in those subjects, and define what students should know to do well in college and the workplace in all subjects.

"We can only succeed in the international global economy if we are competitive and if we innovate," Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said during the House's debate on the three bills that made up its competitiveness package. "We cannot innovate without the investment in education, the investment in science and technology."

As part of that package, the House on April 24 approved the 10,000 Teachers, 10 Million Minds Science and Math Scholarship Act by a vote of 389-22. The House also approved a science and technology bill that day, and a bill to provide loans to small technology businesses the next day. Both those bills passed by large margins.

The Senate passed its bill, 88-8, on April 25.

"The American Competes Act is the best way to keep more of the jobs of the 21st century right here in America and the best way to ensure that our children have the skills to keep America at the forefront of innovations and discovery," Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., the Senate minority leader.

A White House statement expressed concern about the number of new programs proposed in the Senate bill, but it did not threaten a veto. The two chambers' bills would have to be reconciled before Congress could send a measure to President Bush.

Supporters of the bill said that the Senate took a comprehensive approach to solving the problem because the stakes are high.

“We are at risk of losing our brainpower advantage,” Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., a co-author of the bill, said. “If we lose our brainpower advantage, we lose ... our standard of living.”

“Federal investment in the basic sciences and research has long been a critical component of America’s competitive dominance globally,” said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada.

Last week’s action followed more than two years of bipartisan work in both houses that responded to a 2005 report from a panel of business leaders convened by the National Academies. In “Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future,” the panel warned that the United States’ economy would suffer if it failed to improve the scientific and technological skills of its workforce. (“Panel Urges U.S. Push to Raise Math, Science Achievement,” Oct. 19, 2005.)

In the K-12 section of that report, the business leaders set goals of recruiting 10,000 of the nation’s best college students to teach mathematics and science; improving the math and science skills of the 250,000 teachers already teaching those subjects; and doubling the number of students taking Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses.

Congress’ attempt to address the K-12 goals, as well as the broader scientific and technological issues addressed in the report, faltered last year. While the bills passed last week by the House and the Senate share many goals, they take different approaches to meeting them.

The Senate bill would establish several new programs in various federal agencies, while the House legislation focuses more on expanding existing programs, mostly within the National Science Foundation.

Both the House and the Senate bills would do more to attract new teachers to the profession and provide more in-service training to veteran educators who need to improve their expertise in various science subjects, said Gerald F. Wheeler, the executive director of the 56,000-member National Science Teachers Association.

10,000 New Teachers

The House bill sets a goal of luring 10,000 new math and science teachers annually. One mechanism for doing so is an expansion of the existing Robert Noyce Scholarship Program, administered by the NSF, which provides \$10,000 annual scholarships to college students who agree to become math and science teachers.

The bill would increase the number of years of scholarship funding students could receive from two to three years. Students would be expected to teach for up to six years to receive that maximum funding, but could reduce the commitment by agreeing to work in “high need” schools. Scholarships would be converted to loans for awardees who did not fulfill teaching commitments. The Noyce program awards funding to colleges and

universities, which then select students for scholarships, according to an description from the NSF.

The increased monetary incentives would at least offer a carrot for students considering other, better-paying math- and science-related jobs, Mr. Wheeler said.

“We have a hard time competing with corporate America, but this will help get the attention of [prospective] teachers,” he said.

Mr. Wheeler also supports a provision in the House bill that would provide competitive financial awards to establish stronger links between universities’ academic departments in math and science and their teacher-training programs. Many math and science experts say too few students majoring in those subjects consider becoming teachers; too few aspiring teachers, meanwhile, take advantage of strong academic courses offered by math and science departments.

“Nowhere do those two conversations come together,” Mr. Wheeler said.

Some postsecondary institutions, however, such as the UTeach program at the University of Texas at Austin, have drawn praise from federal officials for bridging the faculty divide and producing math and science teachers with strong content knowledge. Mr. Wheeler believes the House legislation would allow more universities to make similar efforts.

Both chambers’ bills would establish new programs to encourage math and science teachers to pursue master’s degrees in those subjects, with the idea that advanced training would provide them with greater subject-matter expertise.

The Senate bill would create competitive grants for states to ensure their standards are linked to higher education and workforce skills.

In an April 23 statement, White House officials voiced numerous concerns about the Senate competitiveness proposal—particularly its creation of new programs at the U.S. departments of Commerce and Energy and at the NSF.

Administration officials estimate that the Senate bill would cost \$61 billion over four years, which they say is \$9 billion more than the four-year price tag for President Bush’s proposed American Competitiveness Initiative, also aimed at improving math and science education.

Scot Montrey, a spokesman for Sen. Alexander, put the legislation’s cost at \$60 billion, but said the measure included only \$16 billion in spending on new programs.

The Senate bill “expands many existing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education programs that have not been proven effective and

creates new STEM education programs that overlap with existing federal programs,” the White House said in the statement.

A soon-to-be-released, congressionally mandated report, part of a review being led by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, will show that many federal math and science programs in teacher training and other areas have failed to produce results, the White House said.

‘Hard Part’ Ahead

The bills passed last week would create the new programs. The next big step, assuming a final version of the legislation is signed into law, would be for Congress to pass appropriations bills to pay for them.

With the budget for domestic spending austere, Congress will struggle to find the money to support the programs that eventually emerge in the competitiveness bill, Sen. McConnell said.

“The hard part, obviously, is going to be providing the funds to carry out the programs in this bill to meet these authorization targets we have set,” he said.

Still, advocates for the advancement of science and technology lauded Congress’ action as a good first step in addressing the needs in their fields.

“These bills are the best possible start to addressing the competitiveness challenge,” said James Brown, a co-chairman of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education Coalition, a Washington-based advocacy group. “It’s an excellent deal, when you consider all the constraints out there.”

May 1, 2007

Improvements Underway

Students at WVU Tech are starting to raise issues with the school's administration about the condition of the school's infrastructure on its Montgomery campus. Students say they are very pleased with their level of instruction and believe they are well trained, but they say buildings they are forced to use for that learning process are not up to standard.

One engineering student points to the example of an engineering professor who blows a fuse every time he plugs in a modern piece of machinery for a classroom demonstration.

The problem is campus-wide and President Charles Bayless doesn't deny any of the complaints.

"I pretty much agree with the students," Bayless tells MetroNews. "When I came back I looked at the Tech I had known when I was there and thought, 'Oh my goodness, what's happened?'"

President Bayless says his wife even pointed out that the furniture in the residence halls was the same furniture that was there when they graduated in 1968.

Bayless adds however, that they are finally moving in the right direction.

"There's a lot going on. There was really no progress for 20-years there was no material construction. We're working on almost every building right now."

Bayless says WVU has passed a \$10 million bond to gut the main residence hall, built in 1939, down to the bare skeleton. He says the building is being rewired with modern electric capacity to run the myriad of electronics that are now normal for a college dorm.

"The building was built in 1939. Students didn't have TVs and I-Pods and computers and refrigerators and on and on. The wiring wasn't made for that capacity."

Furthermore wireless Internet is being installed in all commons areas of the campus and hardwiring for the World Wide Web is being added to dorm rooms.

Bayless says the legislature this past session approved \$3 million for upgrading the engineering building. Typically funding becomes an issue when campus infrastructure

falls into disrepair, but Bayless says Tech hasn't suffered much because of its reputation of delivering highly trained, and skilled students to the state's workforce.

"As long as you're able to deliver the goods, the money will be there."

May 1, 2007

Tech engineering needs big upgrade, its students warn

By Susan Williams

MONTGOMERY — An informal group of West Virginia University Tech engineering students says it wants its voice heard in the future of the school.

On Friday, the students said they attend the best engineering school in the state, but lamented that their facilities are crumbling around them. They said they would welcome a move to the Dow Tech Center in South Charleston.

More than a year ago, Gov. Joe Manchin announced in his State of the State address that Tech's Leonard C. Nelson School of Engineering would move to South Charleston, where officials with Dow were donating a much newer facility for classes, labs and research.

After Montgomery-area residents and some others raised a ruckus, the governor and Tech officials agreed not to move the engineering school. Now, some students say they're suffering from that decision.

"It cannot be the school's job to save the town," said Brandi Dolin, a senior majoring in civil engineering.

She said most students commute to Tech because they choose to live at home, where they have the amenities the town lacks. "Montgomery cannot compete with Huntington or Morgantown," she said.

Right now at Tech, the students said, a professor might plug in a piece of machinery, only to have fuses blow in the building. They also said they walk around buckets set in halls and classrooms to collect rainwater that dribbles into the buildings.

They believe if their school moved to South Charleston, they would have newer buildings and equipment and room to expand.

As student Jesse Sizemore explained as he and his cohorts sat in a lounge in the engineering building, "We are in an outpost."

As they sat around the lounge, the students outlined the drawbacks they face in Montgomery now: limited number of restaurants, no place to see a movie, no decent bus service, few opportunities for places where they could work part-time.

They praised their professors for the “rigorous classes” they teach, but those same rigorous classes kept them from going to the Legislature and getting their voices heard. One student said he was taking a six-hour test while other people were telling legislators not to move the engineering school.

In years past, Sizemore said, they have enjoyed visiting on campus with engineering students in Virginia. The students compete against one another in projects and socialize. However, when Tech plays host, they must rent a facility in Summersville, he said.

“The only thing of Tech we can show them is signs and banners,” Dolin said.

“We’re stuck in a Catch-22,” she said. “We need students and the money they bring to upgrade the school. But until you can upgrade the school, you cannot attract students.”

The students said that 20 of 21 engineering faculty members signed a petition in favor of going to new facilities in South Charleston. They said school officials are having a harder time recruiting faculty because the facilities are so run-down.

They also said many professors want to do research, but the facilities are not adequate for that, and that many professors must provide their own components for some circuits.

The students also want to see Tech offer a graduate program, but again they would need to recruit faculty and improve facilities to make that happen.

They also are disappointed they were left out of the decision-making process. Sizemore said the debate about moving the school became “a political football.”

More than 10 years ago, Tech entered into a partnership with West Virginia University.

Thomas McGrew, a computer science major from Campbells Creek, said, “It’s not the affiliation with West Virginia University that has hurt, but it’s the affiliation with Montgomery.”

Next week, students take final exams, and then school will be out for the semester.

The seniors in the group feel confident they can get good-paying jobs. They said they know employers prefer Tech graduates because they have survived tough classes. As engineers, Sizemore said, they will be important members of their future communities.

April 30, 2007

Marshall ranked 5th nationally in producing family doctors

By JEAN TARBETT HARDIMAN

HUNTINGTON - Marshall University was recognized Friday as the fifth-ranked school in the nation in producing family physicians, MU President Stephen J. Kopp announced. And by ranking in the Top 10, the Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine at Marshall earned a "Family Medicine Top Ten Award" from the American Academy of Family Physicians.

The ranking is based on the performance of all medical schools in the country over the past three years in placing graduates in family medicine residency programs accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, Kopp said.

Dr. John B. Walden of the Department of Family and Community Health accepted the award for Marshall at a Society of Teachers of Family Medicine spring conference in Chicago.

It's a nice recognition for a strong family medicine program that has drawn applicants from across the country, he said.

Dr. Jim Becker, who teaches in the program at Marshall, said it's a sign that Marshall is doing the right thing. The medical school's focus on primary care is one thing that keeps the St. Louis native in this community.

"The focus of the school has always been on a primary care mission to put doctors out into our communities," he said. "I think that's the direction that medicine has to keep its eye focused on.

In this AAFP ranking, the University of Kansas is ranked No. 1 in producing family medicine physicians, followed by the University of Missouri-Columbia, University of Arkansas, University of North Dakota, Marshall University, University of Minnesota, Michigan State University, East Carolina University, University of Oklahoma and Loma Linda University, according to a release from Marshall.

Last year's graduating class had a 100-percent, first-time pass rate on Step 2 of the United States Medical Licensure Examination, which is a rare achievement for a public medical school, Kopp said in the press release. That combined with the Top 10 award demonstrates that the medical school graduates are "exceptionally well-prepared to serve the medical needs of our state, region and nation in a wide array of specialties," he said.

It's Marshall's first year in the top 10, but Marshall has received at least 15 annual awards since the family physician group began in 1992 to recognize schools producing the highest percentages of family physicians, Dr. Charles H. McKown Jr., dean of the School of Medicine, said in the release.

"It is a source of tremendous pride for us that Marshall is one of this elite group," McKown said. "This year's Top 10 award offers richly deserved recognition to the fine faculty members in our Department of Family and Community Health."

This means that Marshall is doing precisely what it was originally set up to do -- train primary care physicians to treat patients of both sexes and of all ages, said Walden, a family physician who has worked with Marshall since 1982. And what it means for the state is that when people get sick, there's an increased likelihood of finding a doctor who can handle most types of problems, even in the most rural areas, he said.

Preparing the finest family physicians is a long-standing goal of Marshall's medical school, said Dr. Robert B. Walker, associate dean and chair of the school's Department of Family and Community Health.

Family physicians from Marshall's medical school and family practice residency program span the state, from McDowell County to both panhandles, he said.

"Primary care and family practice are very important to West Virginia and West Virginia's people," he said in the release. "These are the specialists they most often turn to for their health care. In many cases, family doctors are the only doctors in the area.

"It is very important that Marshall offers this specialty, encourages people to enter it and trains them to a high level in the skills required for it. We feel that this is one of the ways we are meeting the needs of the people of West Virginia."

And Marshall's family medicine doctors are some of the best, Walden said. They'd be competitive in any sub-specialty residency, but they chose family medicine.

"We have a tremendous group of folks, and I enjoy going to work every day," he said.