

NEA Federal and State Legislative Update

A weekly review of progress on the Quality Public Schools Agenda and other legislation that impacts our students, classrooms and public education.

Aug. 5, 2008

School Construction

When Congress returns from the August recess, the Senate is expected to take up an economic stimulus package that includes money to repair and modernize schools. This money will not only help ensure students a safe, modern learning environment but will create thousands of jobs in the process. The bill also includes an extension of the Secure Rural Schools program which has expired.

Victories for Children and Public Education in the 110th Congress, 2nd Session

Congress begins the August recess this week and is scheduled to return after Labor Day and the Republican Convention for an abbreviated session before adjourning for the election. With your help, NEA has achieved a number of victories for children and public education in this session:

Higher Education: After five long years, Congress finally passed legislation to reauthorize the Higher Education Act. The final bill includes many positives for higher education, including:

- Increasing the purchasing power of Pell Grants by raising the maximum award to \$6,000 (from \$4,310) followed by increases of \$400 in subsequent years to reach \$8,000 in academic year 2014-2015.
- Addressing the growing crisis of affordable textbooks by balancing students' abilities to manage costs through advanced planning with respect for faculty's legitimate academic freedom concerns.
- Creating the Patsy T. Mink Fellowship Program to help minorities and women enter the professoriate.
- Authorizing scholarships, support programs and counseling for community college students to help them stay in school and, when possible, enroll in a four-year school.
- Protecting collective bargaining rights.
- Rejecting any mention of "merit pay."

School Modernization: The House of Representatives passed NEA-supported legislation providing \$6.4 billion in federal grants to help states and local school districts repair and modernize public schools. The Senate could take up a stimulus bill in September with school modernization funding (see above).

Tax Revenue for Education: Congress passed housing legislation without an NEA-opposed provision that would have jeopardized available local funding for schools and other

important public services. Removal of this provision from the final bill was an uphill battle and a very important victory for public education.

Medicaid for Students with Special Needs: In June, President Bush signed a bill that includes an NEA-supported delay of scheduled Medicaid reimbursement cuts for school-based transportation and/or rehabilitation services. This hard-fought victory allows students with medical needs to continue receiving the school-based services they need.

Medicare: The House and Senate voted to override the president's veto of the NEA-supported Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act (H.R. 6331). The bill will result in much improved access to affordable, high quality medical care and pharmaceutical services for Medicare beneficiaries in rural and urban areas. In particular, the bill delays a scheduled cut in doctor fees that would have likely caused many doctors to refuse to treat Medicare patients.

Unemployment Compensation: Congress passed, and the president signed into law, legislation to extend unemployment benefits for an additional 13 weeks for people who have exhausted their benefits.

Important Priorities Still on the Agenda

Despite these victories, there is still a lot to be done to ensure great public schools for every student. Members of Congress are scheduled to be back home in August. Take this opportunity to remind your representatives of these important priorities:

Education Funding: Congress has begun work on a bill to fund education programs for fiscal year 2009, which begins Oct. 1, 2008. NEA priorities include increases for key education programs including Title I, IDEA funding and Pell Grants.

Social Security Offsets: The 110th Congress held major hearings on repeal of the GPO/WEP in the House and Senate with the Senate hearing marking the first time a GPO/WEP hearing was ever held in a Senate committee with jurisdiction over the issue. Congress needs to move the bill to repeal these unfair offsets forward for an immediate vote.

Educator Tax Relief: The \$250 tax deduction for educators' out-of-pocket expenses beyond the 2008 tax year will expire, again, at the end of the 2008 tax year. Congress needs to extend this important tax relief.

Rural Education: Even if the Secure Rural Schools program is extended as part of a supplemental/stimulus package, the program still needs to be reauthorized so that it does not continue to expire every year.

NEA Legislative Hotline 800-424-8086

NEA online Legislative Action www.nea.org/lac