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Michele McNeil covered education and state government in Indiana for a decade before joining *Education Week* as a state policy reporter in June 2006. Alyson Klein, who reports on federal education policy, joined the staff in February 2006 after nearly two years at *Congress Daily*.



Michele McNeil Alyson Klein

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Obama Calls for \$60 Billion to Save Teacher Jobs, Fix Schools

By **Alyson Klein** on September 8, 2011 7:09 PM



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UPDATE

President Barack Obama called for \$30 billion in new money to stave off teacher layoffs—and \$30 billion more to revamp facilities at the nation's K-12 schools and community colleges—as he outlined his vision for spurring the sputtering economy in a speech to Congress Thursday night.

The education proposals will be part of a \$447 billion legislative package expected to be introduced next week. The president said he would propose cuts elsewhere to pay for the plan, but he didn't release specifics.

However, details have emerged on what the education portion will look like.

K-12 schools could get up to \$25 billion for renovations, which administration officials estimate could pay for makeovers of at least 35,000 public schools. That construction money could be used for emergency repairs and renovations, energy efficiency updates, and asbestos removal. Schools also could use the money to build new science and computer labs, and to update technology. Another \$5 billion would go to help retool community college facilities.

States would have until Sept. 30, 2012, to decide how to spend the construction money. It would be sent to states based on need, but the biggest 100 districts would get a direct grant. Within states, half the construction money would be competitive, with special priority for rural schools, and the rest would go out by formula. (For more on a possible legislative vehicle for the plan, click [here](#).)

The \$30 billion to avert teacher layoffs, to be spent over two years, could save as many as 280,000 educators' jobs, senior administration officials estimated. To put that \$30 billion in perspective, that's about twice as much as districts got from the main federal K-12 program—Title I grants for

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disadvantaged students—this year.

Districts could use the layoff money to pay for benefits and to hire new staff. And states would *not* have to agree to sign on to the administration's four big education reform priorities—state data systems, turning around low-performing schools, improving teacher distribution, and boosting standards. That's a significant departure from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which sought to reform education while strengthening the economy.

So will this pass?

Probably not.

There's almost no chance that Republicans—who generally think the \$100 billion for education in the stimulus was a giant waste of money—will rush to support this. Remember, the administration had a very tough time getting Congress to approve \$10 billion for the Education Jobs Fund back in the summer of 2010, when Democrats had healthy majorities in both chambers.

In fact, moments after the speech, GOP Rep. John Kline, chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, said:

"More stimulus spending is not the right solution to our nation's job crisis. Common sense tells us that putting the federal government in the business of school construction will only lead to higher costs and more regulations. It also tells us that another teacher union bailout will not ensure a quality education for our children."

Rep. George Miller, the top Democrat on the committee, applauded the proposals, saying many of the steps the president called for were the right ones:

"Congress must put partisanship aside and seize this moment to work together to put Americans back to work and our economy forward moving forward."

Miller recently introduced a bill to help spur local job creation through public sector job creation.

Sen. Tom Harkin, the chairman of the Senate panels that oversee K-12 spending and policy, also cheered the education jobs money and the school construction funding:

"The president's call to renovate our schools is a win-win for our economy and for our children. Kids cannot be expected to reach their full potential if the school they attend is crumbling around them."

But the school facilities funding is going to face a rough road, too. Top Democrats on the education panels, including Miller, D-Calif., and Harkin, D-Iowa, tried to get money for school facilities into the original stimulus bill. But it was stripped out to win approval from moderate Democrats and Republicans. It's tough to see a path for a program like that in the current, much more conservative Congress.

Supporters of the proposals recognize those challenges, but they're hoping Congress can be swayed by public opinion.

"If they were to vote today, then the House Republicans would defeat it," admitted Ross Eisenbrey, the vice-president of the Economic Policy Institute, a non-partisan think tank (which has union officials on its board). He wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* urging Obama to include money for school facilities in the package. "I'm hoping the public reacts to this and says, 'That's the kind of federal spending that I want.'"

"I think the American people are saying to Congress, it's time that you start caring about us," Dennis Van Roekel, the president of the National Education Association, told me. "We have stories coming from the field, classes as large as forty or forty-five students in the elementary grades ... that's just wrong."

Van Roekel said the NEA members would share those stories with their congressmen to help "put a face" on the problem.

Politics K-12 analysis: Administration officials have said this jobs package has pieces that have garnered broad bipartisan support, but the education piece seems more like a re-election campaign promise than a serious legislative proposal.

The Obama administration will need the two teachers' unions—the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers—to help with get-out-the-vote efforts in swing states. The NEA has already [endorsed](#) Obama's re-election campaign, but teachers are still skeptical of his policies (especially his push to tie teachers' pay—and their jobs—to student outcomes).

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The administration has got to be hoping that asking for money to save teachers' jobs will help bridge that enthusiasm gap ... even as teachers realize that Congress will probably say no.

But Van Roekel thinks the union has continued to have a strong relationship with the president.

"American schools needed to be upgraded and repaired, not our relationship," he said.

And these proposals are sure to reignite the debate over whether the education part of the ARRA was money down the toilet—or much needed funding to help boost student achievement and spur local economic growth.

In case you missed it, here's an excerpt from the president's speech:

"The American Jobs Act will repair and modernize at least 35,000 schools. It will put people to work right now fixing roofs and windows; installing science labs and high-speed internet in classrooms all across this country. It will rehabilitate homes and businesses in communities hit hardest by foreclosures. It will jumpstart thousands of transportation projects across the country. And to make sure the money is properly spent and for good purposes, we're building on reforms we've already put in place. No more earmarks. No more boondoggles. No more bridges to nowhere. We're cutting the red tape that prevents some of these projects from getting started as quickly as possible. And we'll set up an independent fund to attract private dollars and issue loans based on two criteria: how badly a construction project is needed and how much good it would do for the economy.

"This idea came from a bill written by a Texas Republican and a Massachusetts Democrat. The idea for a big boost in construction is supported by America's largest business organization and America's largest labor organization. It's the kind of proposal that's been supported in the past by Democrats and Republicans alike. You should pass it right away.

"Pass this jobs bill, and thousands of teachers in every state will go back to work. These are the men and women charged with preparing our children for a world where the competition has never been tougher. But while they're adding teachers in places like South Korea, we're laying them off in droves. It's unfair to our kids. It undermines their future and ours. And it has to stop. Pass this jobs bill, and put our teachers back in the classroom where they belong."

Oh, and Education Secretary Arne Duncan was the Cabinet official left out of the speech this time, a precaution taken in case of a disaster.

Photo: President Barack Obama delivers a speech to a joint session of Congress on Sept. 8, 2011. (Kevin Lamarque/AP-Pool)



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6 comments

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 <p>Name withheld 8:12 PM on September 8, 2011</p>	<p>Score: 0</p> <p><i>This comment was left by a user who has been blocked by our staff.</i></p>	
 <p>retired under duress 12:51 PM on September 9, 2011</p>	<p>Score: 0</p> <p>Anyone who thinks Obama's bill is really going to get the hundreds of thousands of laid-off teachers rehired is sorely mistaken. The last time districts in my home state of NJ got "stimulus" money, they pocketed it, and didn't hire anyone..except for Millville, who chose to hire a Curriculum Supervisor! The only teachers who would have a prayer of</p>	 Report Abuse

getting hired are new college grads, at entry level pay. Those of us with advanced degrees and/or top of the scale (due to longevity and age) will never work as educators again. That is a fact. Why pay for experience and skill when you can get three warm bodies who can be intimidated and pushed around by administrators at the same price? No matter that they cannot do the job. These teachers will never get tenure, and likely will get out of education altogether in five years, unless they have "pull" in their district to save their jobs. The new generation of teachers will be like itinerant farmworkers, playing "musical districts", until they get fed up, or retire. Obama is doing NOTHING to help the education process, he is pandering to the same Union who sold out hundreds of thousands of us so he can have their votes.

The money for "school improvement" will be eaten up by administration, lawyers bickering over who will get it, and corruption on all levels. The wrong people will be benefiting from this "plan".

I think what needs to happen here is that OBAMA MUST GO. He has no clue of what is going on, and his lack of experience as a leader has destroyed our country. We as Americans need to re-think our idea of what a president should be-- and NOT fall in love with a personality, or an ideal. We need someone who is a leader, who has managed and governed, who cannot be bought for ANY price, who knows right from wrong. This certainly is NOT Obama- who charges 35K to attend his birthday bash, and vacations more in one presidency than most working people do in two lifetimes. Our country needs help FAST- or we will all be learning Chinese to speak to our overlords.

 2 replies



MOMwithABrain1

Score: 0

4:53 PM on September 9, 2011

I suspect this was a bribe to the teachers. Since he stabbed them in the back, I suppose it's nice to throw them a bone.

 4 replies



Linda/RetiredTeacher

Score: 0

8:54 PM on September 9, 2011

I agree, but this bone isn't big enough for me. I want to hear gratitude for the nation's teachers. They deserve it.



carson.chris

Score: 0

11:04 PM on September 9, 2011

I cannot believe that poor and middle class people, especially educators are not fully behind our president. I hope Obama is finally drawing a line in the sand for those republicans, whom seem content to let our countries educational system and infrastructure deteriorate. To continue to give tax breaks to corporations and a wealthy few at the expense of schools (which are truly in crisis), the poor, our transportation system, and many other critical needs is really absurd.

Republicans claim that the country debts will ruin the future for our children. I say we may already have lost a generation of youth through the neglect of our schools for many decades.

Our government has provided us with this countries greatest assets: Our state colleges, universities, and public schools. Our interstate highway system, our military, law enforcement agencies, and research facilities to name a few. Are we going to privatize all of these, and expect that

  
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wealthy corporations are going to provide for "the general welfare" of the people or "insure domestic tranquillity". The idea of solving our problems through less government is also absurd.
The poor and middle class need to unite behind this president. Teachers especially need to unite behind President Obama. Get these obstructionist republicans out of office, and lets get on with an agenda thats builds this nation rather than tearing it apart.

4 replies



SandraKay

Score: 0

2:22 PM on September 12, 2011

Of course, anyone who thinks the government should quit throwing money at problems or quit trying to be big brother to everyone or anyone who wants smaller government in general is labeled "tea party" etc etc. That is ignorance. Fallon you are right on. They are labeling you with all that garbage because they have nothing else.

2 replies

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