The Education Report

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The Education Report, a weekly publication of BPAG, provides an executive summary of public policy issues affecting American education. **Please use the bookmarks below to navigate to your area of interest:**

1. Budget and Appropriations

The federal government entered a shutdown on October 1, 2025, and because the Senate has repeatedly failed to reach the 60-vote threshold to advance a funding resolution, the shutdown remains unresolved. So far, the Senate has voted at least twelve times on a measure to reopen the government, with each attempt falling short. Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R-SD) blames Democrats for prolonging the impasse, saying, "Democrats are so committed to shutting down the government, they're rejecting a clean – clean, clean – nonpartisan, short-term funding extension – the very same kind of extension that they supported 13 times during the Biden administration."

For now, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) remains largely insulated from the immediate effects of the shutdown because benefits are funded a month in advance, but officials have warned that November payments could be disrupted if the shutdown continues. States have been advised that reserve funds may not be sufficient to cover future disbursements should the impasse extend into November.

The Department of Education has been particularly affected by the funding lapse and the cumulative effect of reductions in force and other staff reductions. Approximately 95 percent of the Department's non–Federal Student Aid employees have been furloughed, halting much of the agency's oversight and grant administration work. Reports indicate that reductions in force—permanent layoffs—are being planned within the Office of Special Education Programs and other divisions, signaling that the shutdown could have long-term consequences for federal support to schools and states.

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2. In Brief

CENTER FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT LOOKS AT FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

On October 17, the Center for Global Development (CGD) **hosted an event** on the global importance of foundational learning investments. Moderated by David Evans, CGD's Director of Global Education and Child Well-Being, the panel featured Georgetown University Distinguished Professor Jishnu Das, CGD Senior Research Fellow Lee Crawfurd, Global Partnership for Education Chief Technical Officer Jo Bourne, and Prevail Fund Foundational Learning Director Jennifer Swift-Morgan. The discussion underscored a troubling reality: although over 90% of children worldwide now attend elementary school, learning outcomes remain alarmingly poor. For example, just **25% of third graders** in rural India can read and comprehend at a second-grade level. In the U.S., **21% of adults are unable to read**; demonstrating that the problem extends far beyond low-income countries. Crawfurd presented research from Indonesia showing every dollar invested in foundational learning yields $9.30 in returns. Das highlighted a longitudinal study from Pakistan, where a simple **report card intervention** providing parents with comparative performance data generated a 15-year return of $3,142, a benefit-cost ratio of 6.4, and an internal rate of return of 21%. The study also showed significant variation in school quality within villages, with students in higher-performing schools scoring 0.4 standard deviations better—translating to roughly 2 additional years of schooling. Speakers emphasized the enormous economic potential of increased investment. For instance, appropriately funding foundational learning could generate $302,000 in lifetime wage gains for an average school of 74 boys over five years. Swift-Morgan argued that current global investment may fall short by a factor of 1,000, stressing the goal of achieving two standard deviations of improvement from baseline. Panelists agreed that sustainable progress depends on empowering local implementers rather than repeating traditional, top-down development strategies.

PRINCIPALS SHARE STRATEGIES ON AI, CELL PHONES, STUDENT WELL-BEING

On Monday, the American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA), the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) **hosted a panel** discussion on how school leaders are navigating growing responsibilities. These include addressing student and staff mental health, ensuring safe campuses, and adapting to rapidly evolving technology such as artificial intelligence and cell phone policy debates. Three principals highlighted how federal funds support these efforts. A Columbus, Ohio, principal leads a Pre-K–5 school with 240 students, including 45 with significant disabilities, in a district where nearly all schools are Title I. Title IV funds support professional development, Perkins funds career and technical programs, and Title II supports restorative and trauma-informed practices as well as IDEA services like speech, occupational, and physical therapy. A principal from Argyle Magnet Middle School in Silver Spring, Maryland, serves 850 students, 65% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price meals. With Title II funding, the school strengthened teacher recruitment and restorative practices. After introducing daily community circles, disciplinary referrals fell from over 1,000 to about 150 annually. The district also bans cell phones through 8th grade. From rural Wyoming, a principal described how legislators left cell phone policies to districts. His school adopted a building-wide ban for students and staff, fostering greater in-person interaction. He also highlighted the use of AI tools such as ChatGPT for refining ideas and lesson planning. NASSP's Executive Director closed the event by stressing that principals and teachers remain the most critical factors in K–12 education—outweighing per-pupil funding, class size, or school demographics.

AEI DISCUSSES CELL PHONES, SCREENS, IMPACT ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

On Monday, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) **hosted a discussion** titled, "Are Cell Phones in Schools to Blame for Poor Academic Outcomes?" The event, moderated by AEI Senior Fellow Robert Pondiscio, featured Harvard University's Martin West, Education Freedom Center Director Ginny Gentles, and E.L. Haynes Public Charter School Principal Alex Baron. The panel explored whether widespread smartphone use and screen-based learning have contributed to declining student achievement and engagement in U.S. schools. West presented data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showing that test scores have steadily declined since 2013—well before the pandemic—and argued that the rise of smartphones and social media is a major factor. He urged schools to experiment with phone restrictions, citing research from Florida and the University of Pennsylvania linking stricter bans to higher engagement and modest test score gains. Baron shared his school's experience with a comprehensive phone ban, noting strong teacher support due to reduced distractions and improved focus. However, he cautioned that phone bans alone cannot reverse learning losses, as laptops and Chromebooks remain significant sources of distraction. Gentles echoed this concern, criticizing one-to-one device policies and advocating for a return to book-based instruction and limited computer use. Panelists agreed that while cell phone bans are a necessary step, they must be part of a broader strategy to curb excessive technology use in and out of school. They emphasized the shared responsibility of parents, teachers, and policymakers in setting consistent boundaries to help students regain focus and engage more deeply in learning.

SENATE COMMITTEE ADVANCES NATIONAL STEM WEEK ACT

On Tuesday, the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation **advanced** the **"National STEM Week Act" (S. 1070)** during a markup. Introduced by Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Joni Ernst (R-IA), the bipartisan bill directs the National Science and Technology Council's Committee on STEM Education to designate one week each year as "National STEM Week." The goal is to highlight the importance of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics in preparing the next generation for high-demand careers and sustaining U.S. leadership in innovation. Ranking Member Maria Cantwell (D-WA) emphasized the significance of the measure considering recent cuts to federal science funding. "Given how much the administration has cut science funding across the board, I'm glad to see a bipartisan effort to focus on STEM and promoting these tools," Cantwell said. She added that designating a national week would help schools, community organizations, and industry partners collaborate on outreach and educational events that inspire students to pursue STEM fields. Chairman Ted Cruz (R-TX) also voiced support, noting that "millions of American jobs increasingly rely on STEM skills," and that expanding access to quality STEM education is essential to strengthening the economy. The legislation is part of a broader package of bipartisan bills considered by the committee, including measures related to pipeline safety, aviation safety, and oceanic data programs. The National STEM Week Act received unanimous support and was reported favorably out of committee. If enacted, the weeklong observance would promote science and technology engagement across all education levels, reinforcing bipartisan recognition that investment in STEM education is vital to America's economic and technological competitiveness.

URBAN INSTITUTE EXAMINES EVIDENCE ON CASH ASSISTANCE FOR CHILDREN

On Tuesday, the Urban Institute **convened** researchers, policymakers, and advocates to review evidence on cash assistance for children. Supported by the Doris Duke Foundation, the event assessed research following the temporary **2021 Child Tax Credit (CTC) expansion**. President Sarah Rosen Wartell noted **that child poverty fell to 5.2%** during the expansion—the lowest in U.S. history—before more than doubling once the program expired. Today, 13.4% of American children (9.7 million) live in poverty. Census data show the CTC and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) lift 3.7 million children above the poverty line, with SNAP aiding another 1.4 million. Professor Jacob Bastian presented evidence that each dollar invested in such programs yields over $10 in long-term benefits through better health, education, and reduced incarceration. Utah official Tracy Gruber highlighted her state's 43% child poverty reduction since 2012 through integrated data systems and community-led solutions, moving Utah into the top five nationally in child well-being. Still, questions remain. Professor Jane Waldfogel cautioned that null findings from the Baby's First Years study were complicated by pandemic-era benefits received by both study groups. Professor Pam Herd emphasized barriers that exclude families most in need, noting that **20% of EITC-eligible households** do not receive benefits and that **70% of Medicaid disenrollments** stemmed from procedural issues, not ineligibility. Governor Wes Moore described Maryland's expansion of refundable tax credits and mobile-based benefits screening, stressing that solutions must be tailored to local communities. A closing debate between former CEA chairs Doug Holtz-Eakin and Cecilia Rouse underscored enduring tensions: how to finance expanded benefits and whether fiscal constraints should limit refundability. The convening highlighted a core dilemma—strong evidence supports cash assistance, but political and fiscal hurdles remain.

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3. New Publications

The Major Payoff: Evaluating Earnings and Employment Outcomes Across Bachelor's Degrees
Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (October 2025)

How Cell Phone Bans Are Playing Out in Schools
RAND (October 2025)

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4. In the News

Lawmakers Demand Info on Students Detained by ICE, Including on Their Schooling
The 74 Million (October 22, 2025)

Indiana Seeks Federal Waiver to Streamline Education Funding, 'Align' Accountability
Indiana Capital Chronicle (October 21, 2025)

Trump Administration Seeks to Move Special Education to Different Agency
The Washington Post (October 21, 2025)

Trump Gutted the Institute of Education Sciences. Its Renewal Is in Doubt
Inside Higher Ed (October 21, 2025)

Universities Give Cold Shoulder to Trump Compact Offer
The Hill (October 20, 2025)

Ongoing Federal Shutdown Threatens Head Start Access for Over 65K Children
The 74 Million (October 20, 2025)

Demand for Afterschool Programs Outpaces Supply as Cost Becomes Growing Barrier
The Hill (October 19, 2025)

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5. About BPAG

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