

IN THE WORDS OF CONGRESSMAN DALE E. KILDEE

From the Hill

The Michigan Congressman discusses the sea change in education policy, his Fast Track to College Act, and why community colleges should play a role in ESEA reauthorization.



Representative Kildee in front of the Dale E. Kildee-William S. White Building at Mott Community College in Michigan.

EDUCATION HAS LONG BEEN THE FOUNDATION OF OUR COUNTRY. Through historic investments in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, President Obama has demonstrated his commitment to education. And by prioritizing college affordability and high school reform, the President has made clear that the key to keeping our nation competitive is a high-quality education for everyone.



Congressman Dale E. Kildee

In his address to Congress earlier this year, the President asked “every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training” and set a goal that “by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.” By setting these ambitious goals, the President has recognized that a postsecondary education is integral both to individuals’ future success and our nation’s collective strength.

The Fast Track to College Act, which I introduced in March with Senator Herb Kohl (D-Wis.), will help us make great progress toward those goals. The bill, H.R. 1578, establishes new early college high schools and other dual enrollment programs, and provides support to existing programs that already are achieving results. These programs enable students, especially those underrepresented in postsecondary education, to earn an associate’s degree or up to two years of transferrable college credits at no cost to their families, while still in high school. These programs also reduce dropout rates, keep students engaged, and provide a seamless transition to college.

The need for dual enrollment to help students succeed has never been greater. The United States has one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation — nearly half of African-American students and 40 percent of Latino students attend high schools where the majority of students do not graduate. In addition, the cost of attending a public college has almost tripled in recent decades. Tuition has skyrocketed at a rate nearly ten times the rate of increase of the average family’s income. Because of this, and the fact that many students enter college in need

of remedial coursework, almost half of the students who begin college do not complete their degree.

In today’s global economy, a college degree is what a high school diploma used to be — an indispensable part of a student’s ability to succeed. In fact, the top ten fastest growing jobs in America require at least a bachelor’s degree. If we do not make every effort to enable all our students to reach their highest academic potential, we will have failed our moral responsibility, and jeopardized the future strength of our nation.

As the President recently discussed, education goes hand in hand with economic development and national security. There are many examples of this in our history — Land-Grant colleges, the growth of universal public education, the G.I. Bill of Rights, and investments in math and science, particularly after Sputnik.

By exposing more students to college-level work early on, the Fast Track to College Act will better prepare students for a postsecondary education, motivate them to complete a degree, and save them and their families time and money in the process. These innovative schools combine the academic and social supports that students need to succeed, with a rigorous curriculum that challenges students to do their best. Learning takes place in small, personalized environments where the high school and college experiences are aligned.

All of these factors make dual enrollment programs well suited to engage at-risk students, such as low-income youth, first-generation college goers, students with disabilities, English language learners, students of color, and other young people underrepresented in higher education. These programs also provide an on-ramp for students who previously dropped out to return to school and complete their education.

I have seen firsthand the success of dual enrollment programs in my home state of Michigan. In 2007, Governor Jennifer Granholm funded the opening of six early college high schools, including the Genesee Early College in my district. Genesee Early College is a partnership of the Genesee Intermediate School District, the University of Michigan-Flint, and local health care systems that prepares students for careers in the health fields. Genesee Intermediate is also a partner with Mott Community College in the Mott Middle/Early College, which has been enabling at-risk students to earn their associate’s degree since 1991.

It is important to set high expectations for our students and provide them with the support they need to reach those expectations. The Fast Track to College Act does just that. By helping students graduate from high school and giving them a jump start on college, we are not only preparing individuals for future success, but also making our country more competitive on the global stage.

TQ Catches Up With Congressman Kildee

Q: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (also known as No Child Left Behind) is up for reauthorization next year. What are your thoughts about the prospects of reauthorizing ESEA next year?

After 33 years in Congress, I know better than to predict a timeline for reauthorization. I do believe, however, that we have a real opportunity to reauthorize ESEA next year. We made a lot of progress in the last Congress identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the legislation and reached consensus on many of the key issues. We also have a number of new voices in the discussion that bring energy and original ideas to the table. While this combination puts us in a good position to move forward, we will not complete the process until we have a good bill that wins the support of educators, parents, and the general public.

Q: Is there a role for community colleges to engage in ESEA to assist students and parents to prepare for postsecondary education and college success?

In order for our country to remain successful globally, we must change the way we view our K-12 education system. We have to find ways to tap into the resources of the community, especially our partners in higher education. These institutions play an important role in training the K-12 workforce, providing students with access to a rigorous curriculum, educating students about financial aid and postsecondary options, exposing students to college life, and helping students develop graduation and career plans.

Q: Traditionally, community colleges have not been a major stakeholder within K-12 education. Increasingly, however, community college trustees and presidents are concerned about K-12 education because of the significant increase in students who need remedial or developmental education entering their institutions. What are some ways to deal with this growing challenge?

Fortunately, innovative solutions are being developed at the state level to address this problem. Forty-eight states have come together to develop common core standards that will improve the quality of teaching and learning in our K-12 school systems. This initiative will establish K-12 standards in English-language arts and mathematics as well as for college and career readiness. The federal government has also invested \$350 million for the development of quality assessments to match these standards. I am hopeful that states continue to embrace this movement, supporting the development of high quality standards and assessments and the rigorous curriculum that must follow to ensure students have the skills they need to succeed in college.

Q: Your bill focuses on bringing the college experience to high schools. What exactly would this involve and what is your goal with this legislation?

Thanks to more than a decade of innovation in a number of states across the country, we know that early college high schools and dual enrollment programs are tremendously successful. The combination of a rigorous academic program, intensive support, and exposure to postsecondary education gives students a reason to stay in school and earn college credit — tuition free. I believe early college high schools and dual enrollment programs are part of the solution to our country's dropout crisis and would like to see the Fast Track to College Act included in the next reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This legislation should be a key part of the federal government's plan for turning around low-performing schools and providing every student with the opportunity to access postsecondary education.

Q: The recent surge in community college enrollment is unprecedented, due in part to students seeking more affordable education and in part to out-of-work people building their skills and credentials in the hope of finding employment. How are you and Congress working together to help community colleges educate, train, and prepare the workers of tomorrow?

Community colleges have an important role to play in this country's economic recovery. With more and more Americans turning to community colleges for education and retraining, we have to find a way to meet this demand. After President Obama proposed a new goal of graduating 5 million more Americans from community colleges by 2020, the House of Representatives passed groundbreaking legislation that will transform community colleges into high-performing education and job training centers. This \$10 billion investment will create a new competitive grant program to help community colleges improve instruction, work with local employers, improve their student support services, implement other innovative reforms that will lead to a college degree, certificate, or industry recognized credential to help fulfill local workforce needs, and provide resources to ensure community college students can learn in modern, updated, state-of-the-art facilities by renovating campuses in need of repair.

Dale E. Kildee is a Democratic Congressman from Michigan. He is the chair of the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education.