

Senators grill Duncan on spending

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Education Secretary Arne Duncan prepares to testify before the Senate Budget Committee. (Photo by Allyson Byers/Medill News Service)

WASHINGTON — Education Secretary Arne Duncan on Tuesday defended the administration’s plan to increase spending on education by 11 percent in its budget proposal for next year. But he was pressed hard by Republicans, who say that the country does not have the money to support the ambitious spending plans.

“The president’s [proposed] budget represents a good first step toward our shared long-term goal of reducing the Federal deficit,” Duncan told the Senate Budget Committee . “However, we believe it is absolutely essential to keep investing in education so that, as the president put it, ‘every American is equipped to compete with any worker, anywhere in the world.’”

Duncan said that despite overall increased spending, the administration did make cuts and is understanding of the current fiscal environment. President Barack Obama’s new budget eliminated 13 programs that it says were ineffective and proposed to consolidate 38 separate programs into 11 as part of an the No Child Left Behind Act update.

“We want to make it easier for educators to educate children rather than deal with bureaucrats in Washington,” said Duncan. “The budget places a priority on spending smarter through cost-effective reforms that improve student outcomes.”

While committee members agreed that U.S. education must be improved, many believe spending is not the answer. Despite spending increases in recent years, American students still trail behind their counterparts around the world. The U.S. fell from first to ninth place in education and ranks 24th out of 35 nations in math.

“We are spending more than those countries that are beating us. Everyone knows we are in a financial crisis,” said Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., the committee’s ranking member. “Education has been the beneficiary of unprecedented increases in [the] budget. What we need is leadership that focuses on why our education system is not meeting our expectations ... You cannot win the future for our children with borrowed money.”

Committee Chairman Kent Conrad, D-N.D., said that unlike in Asia or Europe, very few American students do homework for two hours a night, mainly because teachers aren’t assigning it. Duncan agreed with this statement and said that America is simply being out-educated and needs to invest differently.

“It doesn’t cost money to do homework. That’s a matter of homework being assigned. That’s a matter of parents demanding it,” Conrad fired back.

There was also tension between committee leaders and Duncan when it came to increased spending on the Pell Grant program, a federal financial aid program for college students.

Sessions questioned why the administration doubled spending on the Pell Grant program when there is no room in the budget for this kind of spending. Duncan justified the increase, citing that America desperately needs more young people going to college and graduating, but in this economy many of them need financial help.

Duncan continuously reminded the committee that the administration understands the fiscal crisis and has made tough cuts in education, but he still believes this area is of the utmost importance

if the United States wants to be a global competitor.

“At the end of the day, I believe we have to invest in education,”
Duncan said.