



Senators seek to harness tax code for education

By [Patti Mohr](#)

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In a sign that education is moving to the forefront of the 110th Congress's agenda, [Senate Finance Committee](#) members spent Tuesday morning talking about student achievement, high school dropouts, teacher turnover and early childhood education.

Education policy is outside the scope of the committee's jurisdiction, but it is a favorite topic for Sen. **Max Baucus**, D-Mont., the committee chairman.

Baucus wants to expand the committee's influence and is working on several tax initiatives to strengthen U.S. schools standing in the global economy. "This is the Finance Committee. It is not the [Education Committee](#). But we're going to make this the Education Committee, too," Baucus said.

Sen. **Charles Grassley**, R-Iowa, the committee's ranking member, expressed reservations about spending more federal money on education because it is primarily a state, local and parental responsibility. However, he said he will help Baucus pass an education tax package.

Several other senators voiced support for finding creative solutions to longstanding education inequities that other policymakers have not been unable to solve.

"This isn't rocket science," said Sen. **John Kerry**, D-Mass., while expressing frustration that policymakers have been talking about the same problems since the 1983 report, [A Nation at Risk](#), was published.

"How many years do we have to hear about attracting quality teachers to high need areas?" Kerry said, while proposing that teachers who work in hard-to-staff schools deserve to have a tax holiday -- or an exemption from having to pay federal income taxes.

Other ideas senators are considering include a federal trust fund for education, special tax breaks for teachers who serve as mentors, and incentives that promote public-private education partnerships.

"We are looking for out-of-the-box ideas," said Sen. **Blanche Lincoln**, D-Ark.

Notable Quotables

While the [Senate Finance Committee](#) hearing on Tuesday focused on how to use the tax code to improve schools, members heard a broad range of advice and opinions from witnesses:

- "Over the last two decades, **Congress** has created a variety of tax incentives designed to help facilitate college attendance. Unfortunately, these incentives have failed community college students," said **Jane Karas**, president of [Flathead Valley \(Mont.\) Community College](#).
- "Learning is now the highest form of capital. It needs to be focused and built around a clear understanding of special skills and competencies that our workforce needs," said **William Green**, CEO, [Accenture Corp.](#)
- "We have asked our nation's educators to take on the most important challenge in ensuring America's future. Yet, we educators are denied economic security and respect," said **Patty Myers**, a [National Education Association](#) member and a teacher in Montana.

- "This is about the convergence of education and the economy, and clearly they are one in the same now," said former Gov. **Bob Wise**, president of the [Alliance for Excellent Education](#).
- "Of the four million American children who start kindergarten each year, as many as one-third are unprepared to learn. Many will never catch up," said **Gregory Taylor**, [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#) vice president for youth and education.
- "While we know our students must develop learning proficiency in the core subjects that have been the bedrock of America's education, we also know that these core subjects must be joined by content of the 21st Century," said **Steven Paine**, [West Virginia Education Department](#) state superintendent.