



American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

AFT Teachers
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AFT Higher Education
AFT Public Employees
AFT Healthcare

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October 21, 2005

U.S. House of Representatives
House Committee on Education and the Workforce
2181 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the more than 1.3 million members of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), I write to reiterate our position on the Higher Education Act (HEA) and comment on its role in discussions about Gulf Coast relief efforts. We appreciate the opportunity to share our views with you.

As we mentioned in our previous correspondence on the HEA, the AFT believes that the reauthorization should focus on expanding college opportunity for all, with special emphasis on students with the most need. We are disappointed that the committee passed a version of the HEA (H.R. 609) that does not move us closer to this goal. This version fails to focus on students and provide the necessary support for them to enter and succeed in college.

The AFT is well aware of the immediate need to help those affected by the hurricanes, and wants to ensure assistance is provided as soon as possible. However, it is our firm belief that rebuilding efforts should not be paid for out of the pockets of poor and middle-income students and their families. Unfortunately, the budget committees already have called for drastic cuts to student aid programs. We oppose these cuts as well as any further cuts. In the aftermath of the hurricanes' devastation, we should be supporting programs to get Americans back on their feet and ensuring that supports for federal student aid programs are available.

In addition to protecting student aid programs from severe budget cuts, we urge you to continue your efforts to provide relief to those afflicted by the hurricane. Legislation passed over the last few weeks, including the Pell Grant Hurricane and Disaster Relief Act (H.R. 3169), the Student Grant Hurricane and Disaster Relief Act (H.R. 3668), and H.R. 2132, a bill to extend the waiver authority of the secretary of education, all take a step in the right direction. However, to get immediate relief to those in need, additional action must be taken.

H.R. 3690, the Katrina College Relief Act, would provide immediate support through a six-month deferment to student borrowers and by recalculating the amount of financial assistance for students affected by the disaster. Additionally, H.R. 4016, the Gulf Coast College Revitalization Act, would establish incentives to help rebuild institutions and re-establish their enrollments and employment. We are particularly pleased that the legislation would provide temporary housing for faculty and staff, as well as the continuation of salary and health benefits.

While legislative assistance is imperative for students and their families in the Gulf Coast region, this should not be seen as an opportunity to impose significant legislative changes beyond that scope. Making legislative changes that address the entire system of higher education under the guise of Katrina relief--such as lifting the 50 percent rule, which was put in place to protect the student aid system from fraud and abuse--is exploiting a terrible situation for political gain.

The AFT respectfully requests that you take our comments into consideration as you move forward on this and related legislation. We look forward to working with you to strengthen the bills and provide immediate assistance to those in need.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Cowan', with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Kristor W. Cowan
Director, Legislation Department

KWC : emc opeiu#2 afl-cio