The Budget and Appropriations Process

Every year, Congress considers 12 “regular” appropriations bills plus additional “emergency” or “supplemental” appropriations bills. These measures provide funding for numerous activities, including education. These measures also fund general government operations such as the administration of federal agencies. Congress has developed certain rules and practices for the consideration of appropriations measures, referred to as the congressional appropriations process (CRS Report: The Congressional Appropriations Process: An Introduction (2004)).

Budget Resolution
The budget request officially starts the appropriations process and is the President’s suggested level of funding for every federal government program. For more information on the budget request, visit http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/.

The real business begins when the House and Senate work on their respective budget resolutions. While this process involves arcane budget-speak and lots of talk of big-picture deficit and spending issues, the budget resolution is of critical importance to even the smallest of federal programs.

The vast majority of programs receive federal funding from the discretionary pot. It is important to keep in mind that while discretionary spending is a source of federal funding, it is not the largest area of federal spending—mandatory spending is.

At this point, it is best to think of discretionary spending as dividing a pie. Every federal program is fighting for as large of a piece of pie as it can get. The budget resolution determines how big the pie is—meaning the larger the number, the easier it is for programs to receive funding or, conversely, the smaller the pie, the tougher the fight for funding.

Who decides how big the pie is? The process starts in the House and Senate Budget Committees. Through deliberations, controlled by the majority party, the Budget Committees decide how big the pie is. Amendments are considered in committee and on the House and Senate floor, and finally, the pie is set. From there, it is up to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees to divide the pie accordingly, funding programs such as the National Writing Project.

Therefore, if the pie isn't big enough, there is very little appropriators can do to prevent programs from being eliminated, let alone provide increases. This is how the budget resolution impacts programs at the Department of Education and all other federal agencies.
**Appropriations**

Traditionally, once the budget resolution is completed, the House and Senate then set to work crafting appropriations legislation within the parameters set by the budget resolution. The appropriation enables an agency or department to 1) make spending commitments, and 2) spend money. Except in the case of entitlements, an appropriation is the key determinant of how much will be spent on a program.

Congress must pass appropriations bills to provide money to carry out government programs for every fiscal year. Appropriations bills are usually divided up by type of program and agency into twelve separate bills: Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration; Commerce, Justice, Science; Defense; District of Columbia; Energy and Water Development; Financial Services and General Government; Homeland Security; Interior and Environment; Labor, Health and Human Services and Education; Legislative Branch; Military Construction and Veterans' Affairs; State and Foreign Operations; and Transportation and Housing and Urban Development.

The 12 subcommittees within the House and Senate Appropriations Committees draft legislation to allocate funds to government agencies within their jurisdictions. These subcommittees are responsible for reviewing the President’s budget request, hearing testimony from government officials and the public, and drafting the spending plans for the coming fiscal year.

Their work is passed on to the full House or Senate Appropriations Committees, which may review and modify the bills and forward them to the floor for consideration. Once the bills are passed by each chamber, they move to Conference where the conferees must agree on appropriations levels that fall within the range established by the already-passed House and Senate versions. The resulting Conference reports must be agreed to by both the House and the Senate before the bill can be sent to the President’s desk for his or her signature.

**Authorizations**

Authorizing legislation establishes the funding limits for programs. You will often hear members of Congress, their staff, lobbyists, and advocates say “funding for the program was authorized at $100 million, but only $12 million was appropriated.” An authorized funding level does not indicate the amount of actual funds.