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NATIONAL NEWS

Key Obama K-12 Programs Won Out in Budget Deal

Education Week

By: Alyson Klein

December 21, 2011

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/12/21/15budget-overview.h31.html?tkn=RTVFFTKQPJhmX%2FjVet7PQ0zU%2BCaQb1E5NOhf&cmp=clp-edweek>

The final budget deal funding the U.S. Department of Education through Sept. 30 of next year reflects the Obama administration's success in fending off House Republican efforts to scrap programs such as Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation, and School Improvement Grants, all administration priorities.

But not everyone is happy about the choice to continue those programs, some of which reflect the administration's emphasis on competitive grants to finance education initiatives. House Republicans had pushed to eliminate such programs to make room for big, \$1 billion increases to major formula-funded programs for disadvantaged children and students in special education.

That would have made some superintendents and advocates for districts happy. The National Association of School Boards, for instance, preferred the House version of the bill, introduced in the fall.

So did Kirk Miller, the superintendent of the Bozeman public schools, a 5,800-student district in Bozeman, Mont. He said in an interview that "formula-driven money that keeps in place promises that have been made in the past to meet the needs of our students outweigh [the need for] newer programs like Race to the Top." Those competitive grant programs "are not a level-playing field for rural states like Montana to obtain funding," he added.

Instead, the two core federal programs that districts depend on—Title I grants for disadvantaged students and state money for special education—would get a tiny boost under a spending bill for fiscal 2012. Title I funding would get a \$60 million increase on the \$14.5 billion it received last year. And special education grants for states would get \$11.6 billion, a \$100 million increase.

The [measure](#) , which was passed Dec. 17 and is awaiting President Barack Obama's signature, would provide a small cut to the Education Department overall, about \$153 million, bringing the department's total funding to \$71.3 billion for the remainder of the fiscal year that ends Sept. 30, 2012.

The final bill, which would continue funding for the administration's favorite initiatives, was much closer to the Senate Appropriations Committee's version of the measure, which level-funded most programs in the department, said Jennifer Cohen, a senior policy analyst at the Federal Education Budget Project at the New America Foundation, a Washington think tank.

"I expected to see more compromises," Ms. Cohen said. Given the rhetoric around holding down federal spending, "I am just generally surprised at how well education did in the end," she added.

But it's unclear how the Obama administration's favorite programs will fare next year. The spending measure only funds the government through Sept. 30. The fate of Race to the Top, the Investing in Innovation program, or i3, and Promise Neighborhoods may hinge on the next election.

If Republicans take the Senate, or the White House, those programs, which are largely unpopular with many in the GOP, may well go by the wayside.

Winners and Losers

The funding measure includes nearly \$550 million for a new round of Race to the Top. Race to the Top was created under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 as a way to reward states that embraced certain reform priorities. It is being continued under the budget legislation and, for the first time, the money will be open to school districts, as well as states.

Lawmakers also included language in the bill specifying that this round of Race to the Top must have a “robust early education component,” although it is unclear whether the department will continue to have a separate competition for early-childhood education, as it did this year.

And the legislation includes \$160 million for a new literacy initiative, serving children from birth to grade 12. The new money would come less than a year after lawmakers eliminated funding for a host of reading and writing programs, including the \$250 million Striving Readers program, as part of an effort to slash overall domestic spending.

Funding for the Promise Neighborhood program, which provides grants to communities that want to pair health and other wraparound services with education, would double to \$60 million, from nearly \$30 million.

Separately, the Head Start early-childhood program, administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was also a winner in the 2012 budget, getting a \$424 million boost, to \$8 billion.

Other key administration priorities received level funding in the Education Department budget. The Investing in Innovation program, which provides grants to nonprofit organizations to scale up promising practices, would get nearly \$150 million, the same as last year. And the School Improvement Grant program, or SIG, which helps turn around the nation’s lowest-performing schools, would be flat-funded, at \$534 million.

But the Teacher Incentive Fund, which allocates grants to help districts establish pay-for-performance programs, would be cut, from nearly \$400 million last year to nearly \$300 million in fiscal 2012.

Lawmakers were able to keep the maximum Pell Grant at \$5,550, by making a major overhaul to some of the central provisions of the program, which helps low-income students cover the cost of higher education. For instance, lawmakers slashed the number of semesters students are eligible for grants to 12, from 18. And Congress lowered the income level that automatically qualifies students for a Pell Grant to \$23,000, from \$30,000.

The 2012 spending measure would also scrap a few programs. It provides no financing for the Foreign Language Assistance Program, which was financed at \$27 million in fiscal 2011. Other casualties include the Teaching American History program, which received \$45.9 million in fiscal 2011, and Voluntary Public School Choice, which received \$25.7 million.

Second Life

But some high-profile nonprofit organizations that were cut in the fiscal 2011 budget would have a second chance at funding under the new spending bill.

The new spending measure includes a \$28.6 million set-aside for literacy programs in a flexible pot of money called the “Fund for the Improvement of Education,” which got \$65 million this year. At least half that new literacy money is supposed to go to school libraries in low-income communities. That could help make up for the loss of \$19 million last fiscal year for the Literacy Through School Libraries.

The rest of the flexible aid can go to national nonprofit organizations that provide books and other literacy activities to low-income communities. That description is a close match for Reading is Fundamental, a book-distribution program that lost \$25 million in federal funding last year.

“It seems obvious that they had a specific program in mind,” Ms. Cohen said. But the language isn’t unusual—education programs that are scrapped often get a second life in the Fund of the Improvement of Education, she added.

Similarly, the spending measure would set aside 1.5 percent of the \$2.5 billion Improving Teacher Quality State grants for a competition for teacher-quality programs. The department ran a similar program this year. The funding would give national nonprofit organizations that lost federal aid in fiscal 2011, such as Teach For America and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, another shot at a grant.

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More Districts Sending Teachers Into Students’ Homes

Education Week

By: Stephen Sawchuk

December 13, 2011

The expansion of a parent-involvement strategy in which teachers make scheduled visits to their students' homes promises to yield insights into how those visits might be used to improve outcomes for students and sustain engagement by parents in their children's academics.

Though the economic downturn has affected some of the expansion, districts, philanthropists, and teachers' unions have poured funding into a variety of new teacher home-visit projects over the past five years. Many of them are taking steps to track the results of their efforts, determine their impact on student behavior and academics, and make adjustments to the programs along the way.

Among them is the Denver district, where Superintendent Tom Boasberg this school year committed \$100,000 from the general fund—supplemented by Title I dollars for disadvantaged students—to expand a teacher home-visit program from five to 23 schools in 2011-12.

"We can see there's tremendous value in these visits, but quantitative data matched with qualitative data gives us the truth, and that's what we're after," said T. Jason Martinez, the deputy of academic operations for the Denver district, who is helping track the data generated from the new program.

Lessons Learned

Begun in 1998 in the Sacramento, Calif., area, teacher home-visits are based on a common-sense idea: Parents are more likely to be engaged in their son or daughter's progress through school if they feel that they have a real partner, not a remote authority figure, in their child's teacher.

Details of the programs vary by community, but the basic approach consists of a duo of teachers who make at least two scheduled visits to the home of a student—usually in elementary or middle school—to meet with his or her parents.

The first visit is made purely to establish a relationship with the parents, to learn about the child's hopes and aspirations, and to gain insight into factors that may be affecting student performance.

"There is a gold mine of information in that home—whether it's fully furnished or whether they don't have electricity," said Karen Kalish, a philanthropist based in St. Louis who has led the creation of teacher home-visit programs in several Missouri districts.

For example, just one visit home can help a teacher understand that a particular student doesn't have a desk or a place to do homework.

"The teacher can now do something different with the child, instead of sending homework home and getting mad when it's not done," Ms. Kalish said.

During the second visit, which takes place somewhat later in the school year, the teacher provides academic feedback to parents. The idea is to enlist each parent as a "co-teacher," who can help with goals for reinforcing lessons, whether it means reading aloud three times a week or helping with division flashcards.

Teachers are paid a per-visit stipend or at the extra rate specified in their contracts.

To an extent, home-visit projects have waxed and waned with budget cycles. It is especially the case in California, where the state legislature appropriated funding to scale up the Sacramento model to other locations three times between 1999 and 2005. Many of those programs have disappeared as funding dried up.

But as teachers have come increasingly under the spotlight to demonstrate results, having a partner at home is intuitively appealing to many and promoting new interest among educators.

"Teachers today cannot close these gaps by themselves, it's just not doable. You need those partnerships to really make those gains," said Nancy Fong, a teacher at Earl Warren Elementary School in Sacramento, who does home visits. "What's important to me is that they speak education talk at home, support their children in the home, read to them. ... I can handle it at school, but I need for them to really support me at home."

Teachers' unions have helped to seed several new examples. The [National Education Association Foundation](#) has provided setup money for the idea in Seattle, Springfield, Mass., and Columbus, Ohio, as part of its Closing the Achievement Gaps philanthropy; other sites participating in the NEA's [Priority Schools Campaign](#) are taking similar steps, while affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers have created programs in communities such as St. Paul, Minn.

Philanthropic Support

Philanthropy has also played a role. In the District of Columbia, the Flamboyan Foundation has helped to train more than 400 teachers.

Carrie Rose, the executive director of the Sacramento-based [Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project](#), a nonprofit that helps oversee

the program in that area and has provided training to educators in Washington and a dozen other states, believes recent developments in education policy are also fueling interest in the idea.

"There is a heightened interest in parent engagement. And the other reality is, I think it's just so hard right now," she said. "It's a painful time in public education; there are shortfalls; there's infighting around who's responsible, and at the end of the day, for the folks at the ground level, it's important we have something we can do together."

Research Context

Several of the new examples differ from earlier efforts in taking a systematic approach to studying and learning about the model.

In general, research links family engagement in a child's education to school success. One recent study by the Consortium for Chicago School Research, based on more than 15 years of data from Chicago schools, found that creating opportunities for family engagement and linking improvement goals to the community is one of the top five ingredients for school improvement. ("[Chicago Study Teases Out Keys to Improvement](#)," Jan. 27, 2010.)

While several researchers have also examined the Sacramento home-visiting program at the elementary and high school levels, some scholars say more research in general on teacher home visits is needed.

"I haven't seen enough studies measuring particular outcomes that could be linked to the structure or nature of the home visit," said Joyce L. Epstein, the director of the [National Network of Partnership Schools](#), at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, which helps communities use research to improve family engagement. "The ones I know of are from the preschool level."

Ms. Epstein underscored that home-visit programs generally don't reach all students, so they can't substitute for comprehensive family-engagement efforts. (It is left up to participating schools and teachers to determine how many and which families to visit; on principle, most of the programs' leaders say all families should be eligible, not just poor or minority ones.)

And she added that a gap in the research on the home visits is developmental in nature—in other words, studies that help determine the specific features and practices of home visits that lead to effective parent engagement.

"The home visits have to be very carefully planned with an agenda and information—when and why, with whom, and at what cost," Ms. Epstein said.

Several of the flourishing teacher home-visit programs are working to institute data collection that will allow for such research.

The Denver program collects both information from teachers uploaded to the student-information system and information from school officials on the number of visits per teacher and cross-tabulates it with data from individual student records. Over time, the data will be longitudinal, Mr. Martinez said.

The director of research training in the district's department of parent and community research, Patsy J. Roybal, has a litany of questions she hopes the data will be able to answer in several years: whether student achievement is up and behavior referrals are down, whether parents who have received visits become involved in school governance, and whether teachers who are participating have higher rates of parent attendance at their parent-teacher conferences.

And finally, Ms. Roybal said, she hopes the data will help ensure the program is sustained.

"I think the biggest factor will be our ability to document, and put in a strong evaluation process, so that we can demonstrate that we actually are seeing success," she said.

Among the most data-rich new examples is [Home Works!](#), begun by Ms. Kalish, the philanthropist, in 2006. The project works with the St. Louis school district and several suburban ones that receive students through the city's voluntary-busing program.

The group conducts an annual evaluation based on surveys of teachers, parents, and students and data from state tests, attendance records, and disciplinary referrals.

Ms. Kalish's group has used the information to expand on the basic home-visit model and to strengthen the training provided to participating teachers. Training now involves role-playing, scripting, and how to handle any number of potential occurrences—if parents want their child to be present, if they ask for money, or if they offer refreshments. In addition to the visits, Home Works! includes two family dinners at school, which offer additional opportunities for parents to hear from teachers about the visits, and vice versa. Getting parents to attend the dinners, which occur after each home visit, is a challenge.

Ms. Kalish calls it the "Can You Come?" discussion. "We say to the mom, 'We're having a dinner at school, can you come?' And she'll often say, 'I have four kids, I can't come,' and we say, 'Bring them all—can you come? We'll send transportation; it'll wait for you and take you home.' "

National Movement

The National Parent/Teacher Home Visit Project is also thinking about how it can scale up evidence about home visits.

While individual sites affiliated with the network continue to collect their own data about the home visits, "it is expensive and

limiting to only conduct local evaluations when our work is connected nationally," Ms. Rose, its executive director, said.

The organization is securing foundation funding for a national study that would examine the impact of the visits for teachers, parents, and schools in up to five communities. It hopes to put out a request for proposals early next year.

Ms. Kalish, meanwhile, has had inquiries from educators in places as far away as Rochester, N.Y., and Compton, Calif., interested in setting up a home-visit program. But she's holding off until she's convinced her team has the details of the visits down pat.

"We want to have a very good foundation—we want to go deeper before we go broader," she said. "This is tough stuff, and we need the data."

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STATE NEWS

Tennessee, Massachusetts 'Stand Out' in NCLB Waivers Bid, Group Says

Medical Daily

By: Christine Hsu

December 20, 2011

<http://www.medicaldaily.com/news/20111220/8336/education-no-child-left-behind-nclb-analysis-colorado-florida-indiana-minnesota-new-mexico.htm>

Two states are "stand out" from a pack of eleven for clarity in focus as they seek approval from the Obama Administration to waive some requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, a U.S. think tank said Tuesday.

Tennessee and Massachusetts were among the states in the first round of application submissions since the Administration offered an opportunity for waivers in March of 2011. The U.S. Department of Education is in the process of evaluating the applications.

The Center for American Progress released an analysis on Tuesday on predicted outcomes and suggested improvements for the first batch of the submitted applications.

CAP noted that the administration had made it clear that states, asking for waivers, should engage in "ambitious but achievable" reforms that are more than requests for clearance from the law, and with this in mind CAP reviewed and rated each of the 11 waivers accordingly.

"While we did not rank or grade the states, the applications from these two states stood out from the rest for their clear goals and ready-to-implement evaluation systems," CAP said in a report.

The organization established its analysis by examining states' proposed evaluation and accountability systems. The clarity of goals and accessibility of evaluation systems were determined by the five qualities that emerged from the agency's analysis: Clarity of goals, clarity of school ratings, inclusion of subgroups, readiness to evaluate educators, and the reduction of burden.

Tennessee and Massachusetts stood out from the rest of the states for "articulating clear and challenging goals, proposing focused school-rating system, and having data infrastructure that will help them implement evaluation systems," and although the applications possessed notable strengths, it was noted that the two applications still had room for improvement.

The agency rated applications for Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Minnesota, and New Mexico as "Middle of the pack," with some positive and some negative points.

Georgia, Kentucky, New Jersey and Oklahoma were ranked to be the lowest in application quality, and the agency said that these states would need to provide more detail before they can be approved.

CAP also offered a few pointers to the Department of Education on evaluation methods for current and future waivers.

The group said the department should take more time in making decisions for applications, ask for more information that requires states to clarify points of accountability and implementation, and proceed with caution by carefully identifying plans that enhance subgroup and school accountability.

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Michigan Gov. Snyder signs bill lifting charter school limits

Associated Press

By: Kathy Barks Hoffman

December 20, 2011

<http://www.detnews.com/article/20111220/SCHOOLS/112200420/1026/schools/Snyder-signs-bill-lifting-charter-school-limits>

Lansing— Public universities in Michigan will be able to authorize an unlimited number of charter schools by 2015 under legislation signed Tuesday by Gov. Rick Snyder.

The state has 255 charter schools and new ones are allowed to open under certain circumstances. But the state has a limit of 150 charter schools authorized by public universities. The cap will be raised to 300 in 2012 and 500 through 2014 before being eliminated in 2015.

Democrats, teachers unions and some administrators say the move will hurt traditional public school districts. They charge that the new law doesn't require enough oversight of charter schools, which are largely run by private, for-profit companies. They wanted the law to do more to ensure the quality of new charter schools.

But Snyder said quality is assured because charter schools must meet the same requirements as other public schools. Charter schools get state education funding but are generally run outside regular school districts, although districts are allowed to set up and oversee charter schools.

"People are looking for choice — high-quality choice," he said at a signing ceremony. "We're going to make sure we deliver the best to our kids."

Supporters say having more charter schools will boost options in public education, especially for students in poorly performing school districts. More than 115,000 Michigan students attend charter schools.

House Education Committee Chairman Tom McMillin, a Rochester Hills Republican who took over running the committee after GOP Rep. Paul Scott was recalled for aggressively pushing changes in teacher tenure laws and other school-related issues, said thousands of Michigan students are on waiting lists to get into charter schools.

"There's going to be a lot of hope for kids who didn't have it" now that the cap is being lifted, McMillin said.

Snyder also signed bills Tuesday setting up a new fund to help low-income residents pay their winter heating bills, excluding agricultural property from the calculation of a homestead's taxable value and extending the deadline to Dec. 31, 2016, for when multiline telephone system service users must install necessary equipment and software to provide more specific location information of 911 calls.

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Utah's high school grad rate drops under new formula

Salt Lake Tribune

By: Lisa Schencker

December 20, 2011

<http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/53153232-78/students-rates-state-formula.html.csp>

Utah's high school graduation rate is significantly lower under a new federal formula that changes who counts as a graduate.

According to data released Tuesday, the state's graduation rate for the Class of 2011, calculated using the new formula, is 76 percent — a big change from the 90 percent graduation rate calculated by state officials for the Class of 2010.

But Judy Park, state associate superintendent, emphasized Tuesday that the difference is because of how rates are calculated, not because fewer students are graduating.

"If you just look at this you would say, 'Wow 90 percent of the kids were graduating in 2010 ... What happened to all those students? Why are we not graduating our students?' " Park said. "Well that's not the case. It's a change in the calculation, not a change in student behavior."

Plus, Utah's graduation rates are improving, she said. When state officials applied the new formula to years past, they found that the state's high school graduation rate has actually risen by 7 percentage points over the past four years. Graduation rates also have improved among students who are Latino, black, American Indian, English language learners, from low-income families, and who have disabilities — though gaps between groups remain.

"There's been incredible improvement happening in the state and I think this speaks to the hard work students and schools are doing," Park said. Still, she said, "Until we can say 100 percent of our kids graduated I think there's always room for improvement."

All states are being required to use the new formula in an effort to make comparisons easier between states and ensure rates aren't inflated at the state level. The formula, however, changes the way many states have been calculating their rates. Chris West, a researcher at the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, said he expects 5 to 10 percent declines in most states.

But he says it's a good switch, calling the new rates "more realistic" because they focus mainly on counting students who earn regular diplomas.

"They weren't inaccurate before," West said of the old state calculations, "but if everybody is defining things differently it's hard to have a national discussion."

Under the new calculation, different students are counted as graduates and nongraduates. For example, the old Utah formula counted as graduates students with severe cognitive disabilities who took a certain state assessment but didn't earn regular diplomas; students who earned GEDs; and special education students who took more than four years to graduate. Now, none of those categories of students can be included as graduates.

Also, students who transfer to higher education, to a Utah College of Applied Technology, who withdraw from high school due to illness or injury, for example, or who earn certificates of completion (meaning they didn't leave high school but didn't earn enough credits to graduate either) must now be counted as nongraduates whereas before they weren't included in any calculations.

And, the statewide graduation rate is now being calculated starting with 9th graders instead of with 10th graders.

With those changes, most Utah school districts saw their graduation rates decline for last school year.

Among the five largest school districts in the state, Canyons District had the highest graduation rate but still saw its rate drop from 95 percent to 83 percent because of the new formula.

Canyons Superintendent David Doty credited the district's relatively high rates to its focus on encouraging students to take courses meant to prepare them for life beyond high school, such as by offering differentiated diplomas.

Despite the drop, Doty said he supports the new formula because it counts students starting in ninth grade rather than 10th.

"I anticipated that it would happen, I think we all did, but I'm certainly not discouraged by it," Doty said of the decrease. "I think it's a more comprehensive way of looking at it."

Park said she thinks the new calculation is good but cautioned that it's important to continue to honor and recognize students who may not earn diplomas because they're in special education or continuing their educations in other ways.

The formula change also led to big drops among rates for minority groups. According to the new data, only 57 percent of Utah's Latino and American Indian students are graduating, though their rates are improving.

Isaiah "Ike" Spencer, chair of the state school board's Coalition of Minorities Advisory Committee, said he can see how those numbers might have dropped now that ninth grade is included.

"You're looking at more people that aren't going to be in the high paying jobs," Spencer said, noting it will be difficult for state leaders to reach the goal of having a highly skilled future workforce with such graduation rates. He said he'd like to see graduation rates calculated using data starting in eighth grade, to get an even better picture.

According to state office data, dropout rates about double each year from seventh to 12th grades, with the highest percentages of students dropping out as seniors.

State officials also released data Tuesday showing that class sizes, in many cases, have increased this year, though statewide class sizes overall remain unchanged. The median class size is 24 students in elementary grades and 29 students in secondary schools.

As was true last year, schools that failed to meet federal testing goals had larger class sizes on average than those that passed. Also, schools with high percentages of students from low-income homes tended to have lower class sizes, likely because they often receive additional federal funding, Park said.

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More Georgia Schools Accused of Cheating

New York Times

By: Alan Schwarz

December 20, 2011

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/21/education/cheating-found-among-schools-in-georgias-dougherty-county.html?_r=1&adxnli=1&ref=education&adxnlix=1324476411-BXjvhKDrGs1o7sZKqv0hwA

Investigators who this year found rampant cheating among Atlanta public school teachers and principals released another report on Tuesday detailing widespread wrongdoing in another Georgia county.

Cheating by officials on 2009 state standardized tests was found in each of 11 schools investigated in Dougherty County, which includes the city of Albany about 200 miles south of Atlanta. The report described dozens of cases of adults giving students answers during tests or correcting their mistakes afterward. One fifth-grade teacher passed students who could not read, the report said, resulting in their not receiving extra help.

The details of the report echoed results of similar investigations this year in Atlanta, Philadelphia and Washington, underscoring a widespread debate about the reliance on high-stakes test results, which are used to evaluate students and teachers and to measure improvements required by the federal [No Child Left Behind Act](#).

The findings “paint a tragic picture of children passed through with no real or fair assessment of their abilities,” Gov. [Nathan Deal](#) of Georgia said in a [statement](#). “To cheat a child out of his or her ability to truly excel in the classroom shames the district and the state.”

The report by investigators, working at the governor’s request, said district officials were not directly involved in the cheating, yet “should have known and were ultimately responsible.”

Mr. Deal, a Republican, said the findings would be sent to the Dougherty County District Attorney’s Office. In Atlanta, law enforcement officials have yet to determine whether people involved with cheating there will be prosecuted.

Eighteen educators admitted to cheating in Dougherty County, the report said, adding that at least 31 others were involved. At one Albany elementary school, the principal instructed a teacher to correct students’ wrong answers, the report said; another teacher “gave students the answers and reviewed sections of the test before it was administered.”

The superintendent of the Dougherty County School System, Joshua W. Murfree, could not be reached by phone on Tuesday. Schools in Dougherty County are on Christmas break, with classes resuming on Jan. 5.

“I’m so angry I don’t know what to do today,” Michael J. Bowers, the lead investigator in both the Dougherty County and Atlanta inquiries, said in a telephone interview. “I don’t care what your politics are, your station in life, the color of skin. This is an American tragedy.”

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