

News from Congressman Jim Oberstar



Spring 2002

Securing America's Future For All Our Families

Dear Friend,

As America continues to restore its wounded spirit and rebuild its devastated buildings following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, our nation looks forward to the challenges we face in 2002 at home and abroad. While all Americans stand firm with President Bush in support of our troops serving overseas and of our nation's war on terrorism, we must not neglect areas of serious concern here at home.

The uncertainty of our nation's economy and the unpredictability of the stock market has caused families to face even more formidable challenges in meeting their current financial needs and in planning for the future. The purpose of this report is to update you on significant issues related to your family that Congress will be addressing this year, including protecting children from the dangers of lead poisoning, investing in public education, and strengthening the Social Security system.

In the coming months, I will continue to work with President Bush and my colleagues in the Congress on bipartisan solutions to the challenges ahead. I am committed to working for the security of our nation, as well as securing the future for all Americans.

While all Americans stand firm with the President in support of our troops serving overseas and of our nation's war on terrorism, we must not neglect areas of serious concern here at home.

Sincerely,

James L. Oberstar, M.C.

Congressman Oberstar has an office near you! If you have questions about these or any other issues, call us or visit our website at www.house.gov/oberstar



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Saving Social Security

The National Journal reports that the economic aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks had a profound effect on the nation's economy:

“Among the major losses to be counted, surely, will be whatever remains of the 14 percent drop in the stock market, most of which came in the initial days after trading resumed on September 17 in New York. Depending on who is counting, this amounts to the disappearance of between \$1 trillion and \$1.4 trillion in wealth.” (*The National Journal*, September 29, 2001)

While the stock market lost more than \$1 trillion, the Social Security Trust Fund did not lose a dime. As the economic consequences of the terrorist attacks continue to

mount, and as the Baby Boomer generation fast approaches retirement, many Americans' economic security is in doubt. Clearly, many hardworking people who thought they would retire with a comfortable “nest egg” from years of saving and investing in the stock market will now have to rely on Social Security to meet their living expenses. **The question remains whether the Social Security system and the reserve money in its Trust Fund will be sufficient to meet the needs of the aging population.**

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In 1999, 2000, and 2001, the House of Representatives voted seven times to fully protect the Social Security Trust Fund, by putting it in a “lock-box” to prevent it from being used to pay for tax cuts or additional spending.

The only way to properly prepare for the Baby Boom generation's retirement is to establish a long-term budget plan that will protect the Social Security Trust Fund.

In May 2001, the majority party in Congress passed the President's tax legislation that contributed to the erosion of the \$5.6 trillion surplus the Administration inherited on taking office, January 20, 2001. By January 2002, the Congressional

Budget Office projected that Social Security would be depleted by \$845 billion over the next decade, primarily due to 2001 GOP tax cuts. In February 2002, the Bush Administration proposed a budget that made things even worse — \$675 billion in new tax cuts over the next ten years. In addition to the \$845 billion hit the Social Security Trust Fund will take, every penny of the \$675 billion in proposed new tax cuts also comes out of the Trust Fund.

The only way to properly prepare for the Baby Boom generation's retirement is to establish a long-term budget plan that will protect the Social Security Trust Fund and use the Social Security surplus only for Social Security and paying down the national debt held by the public (currently \$3.4 trillion). Paying down the national debt will strengthen the financing of the Trust Fund over the long term and better enable the country to meet its commitments to the millions of Americans in the Baby Boom generation. **Congressman Oberstar and the minority party are committed to the national priority of assuring the long-term financial strength of the Social Security system.**

Committed to Public Education

While the American public and Democrats in Congress recognize how vital the investment in public education is, the majority party in the House of Representatives and the Bush Administration have proposed a budget that will underfund public education.

President Bush's highly touted "No Child Left Behind Act" calls for \$26.3 billion for Elementary and Secondary Education programs. However, his Fiscal Year 2003 budget provides \$22.1 billion—a huge \$4.2 billion gap. The

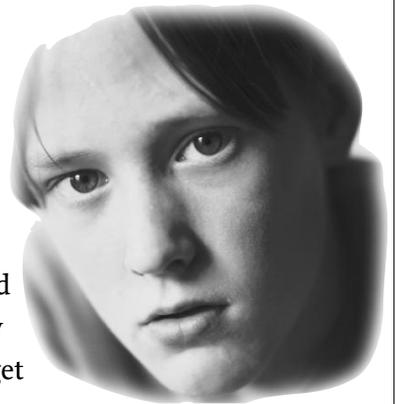
Administration proposes only a 2.8% increase in Department of Education funding—the lowest increase in recent years. By comparison, over the last five years, Congress raised education funding by an average of 13%. The President's budget

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would eliminate 28 specific elementary and secondary education programs. Additionally, the budget proposes cuts in other programs including educational technology (a cut of \$134 million, or 15.7%), Improving Teacher Quality programs (down \$105 million) and Safe and Drug-Free Schools (cut \$102

million, or 13.7%).

A Democratic-supported education bill currently being considered by Congress would provide America's school children with modernized public schools, high tech classrooms, 100,000 new teachers, and pre-school and after-school programs that can make a real difference in children's lives. **Congressman Oberstar, along with other members of the minority party in the House, will continue to fight for education funding.**



Protecting America's Children

The Bush Administration recently announced that it is considering a repeal of the requirement to test low-income children for lead poisoning. If adopted, the policy change would end the federal requirement that all states test young children on Medicaid for elevated lead levels. Instead, states could reinterpret federal law, redefine who is at risk, and possibly test fewer children.



This repeal would put thousands of children at risk, because lead poisoning can cause learning disabilities and brain damage. Lead is a toxic metal that causes reduced IQ, learning disabilities, and has even been linked to juvenile delinquency because of its effects on the brain. Children are exposed to lead by old lead-based paint and lead-contaminated soil.

The requirement to test for lead exposure through the Medicaid program has reduced the number of children who suffer terrible ailments that result from lead poisoning. Unfortunately, the Bush Administration's proposal to repeal this requirement will likely have the opposite effect—fewer exposures will be caught, and more children will suffer the debilitating effects of lead poisoning.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, nearly one million children have elevated levels of lead in their blood. Low-income children are eight times more likely than other children to have high amounts of lead in their blood, and African American and Latino children are five times more likely than white children to suffer from lead poisoning.

Congressman Oberstar and fellow Democrats will work to reverse course and help protect children from lead exposure.

Congress of the United States
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Washington, D.C. 20515-2308

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