

# Fresno Unified leader Hanson backs Obama education plan at White House meeting

By Michael  
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Michael Hanson, Fresno Unified superintendent, talks about his meeting Monday, March 16, with President Obama and other administration members at the White House. THE FRESNO BEE

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WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama on Monday found an ally in Fresno Unified School District Superintendent Michael Hanson.

During an hour-long meeting, Obama pitched his education priorities to Hanson and other superintendents. For the school leaders and administration officials now facing some high-stakes legislative struggles, the White House session came at a key time.



“We were reinforcing to him the importance of his continued support,” Hanson said, adding that Obama’s “articulated vision for what goes on in public schools gives us the room to do this very difficult work.”

Hanson is a member of the executive committee of the Council of Great City Schools, which represents 67 districts serving cities that include Sacramento, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The late morning meeting in the White House’s Roosevelt Room came as part of the council’s annual legislative conference, a four-day program that features speeches, receptions and briefings. Politically, the timing was apt, as the Republican-controlled Congress and the Democratic White House are now maneuvering for position across several fronts.

“This is a pretty polarized city,” Hanson said, standing on the driveway outside the West Wing of the White House. “You can feel it when you come here.”

This week, the polarization will intensify when House and Senate budget committees unveil budget resolutions that spell out Republican priorities on everything from education to defense. The House committee members include Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Calif., a staunch conservative whose district stretches from Fresno County in the south to Amador County in the north.

Separately, House GOP leaders have been struggling to pass a bill reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The bill, dubbed the No Child Left Behind Act during the George W. Bush administration, has roiled conservatives critical of the federal government’s role in education, but it has also worried educators who fear funds will be diverted away from the neediest.

After failing to rally a majority on Feb. 27, Republican leaders pulled the bill from the House floor and have not yet rescheduled a vote. The Obama administration has warned that the president would veto the bill, now renamed the Student Success Act.

“We are making too much progress now in terms of graduation rates, improved reading scores, improved math scores, increasing standards, increasing access to the resources the kids need for us to be going backwards now,” Obama said following the meeting with superintendents.

Nationwide, high school graduation rates for African American, Hispanic and Native American students have increased during the past two years, Education Department records released Monday show. The nation's overall high school graduation rate reached a record 81.4 percent during the 2012-13 school year.

The Fresno district's graduation rate of about 76 percent during that school year was somewhat lower than the national average. The other superintendents who met with Obama on Monday, serving cities like Kansas City, San Francisco and Washington, D.C., struggle with similar challenges.

"The students they work with are largely poor, and they're largely people of color," Education Secretary Arne Duncan said.

One specific sticking point between congressional Republicans and the White House involves the distribution of Title I funds, designed to help districts serve low-income students. The Fresno Unified School District relies heavily on the funds and currently receives about \$46 million annually through Title I.

The stalled House bill revises the funding through an idea called "portability," which would attach dollars to individual students rather than to the district as a whole. If the student moved, the old district would lose the money.

Republican supporters say portability promotes parental choice and ensures all low-income students receive their fair share of federal dollars. Skeptics don't buy it; by Obama administration estimates, the Fresno district would lose upwards of \$4.9 million.

"A raid on those Title I dollars," Hanson said, "would be a significant problem."

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