

Exploiting all the little children

By: Neal McCluskey – March 2, 2013

Federal education involvement seems to be all sweetness and light, focused on helping the most innocent and needy Americans. But as sequestration is bearing out, reality is often quite different: It's about exploiting "the children" for political gain.

For evidence, look no further than the doomsaying of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Several days ago, while blaming Congress (read: Republicans) for the sequester his boss proposed, Secretary Duncan declared that "no one in their right mind...would say this is good for kids and good for the country, yet somehow it becomes tenable in Washington. I just think people don't spend enough time in the real world. "

Such a pronouncement keeps with the overwrought rhetoric of the entire Obama administration, which makes it seem as if an \$85 billion reduction to a \$3.6 trillion budget would cut us back to the Stone Age. Especially when it comes to education, there's simply no basis for such talk.

Let's start with the size of the cuts.

Under sequestration, federal education spending is slated to be reduced by about five percent. Almost any business in America could find a way to trim that much without seriously affecting its core operations.

But that's just the federal portion of education funding, meaning the overall cut would be even smaller. Washington provides only about ten percent of total elementary and secondary funding. Multiply that by five percent, and you get just a half-percent overall reduction.

Are we supposed to believe that in the "real world" schools can't find a way to make a half-percent trim without robbing children of their futures?

They can, and they must. The overwhelming evidence is that the American education system is obese and needs to drop lots of weight, not just half an ounce.

Over the last roughly 40 years we've seen huge increases in public school staffing that have dropped student-to-employee ratios from around fourteen-to-one to eight-to-one. In the same timeframe, federal data shows that inflation-adjusted spending per-pupil rose from \$5,726 to \$13,141 -- a 129 percent increase that dwarfs a half-percent divot.

At least academic achievement increased in that time, right? Wrong: According to the federal government's own National Assessment of Educational Progress, scores for seventeen-year-olds, our schools' "final products," were almost completely static. In a nutshell, massive increases in spending have had no discernible impact on student achievement.

We've encased public schools in layers of fat, and the U.S. Secretary of Education -- whose own department put out the evidence -- declares that "no one in their right mind" would call a diet "good for kids"?

To borrow a favorite phrase of the president's, let's be clear: The overwhelming evidence is that federal spending does no educational good and likely significant harm. So the tiny cut that would come with sequestration would be a small move in the right direction, not a leap into the abyss. In light of this, Duncan's rhetoric is almost certainly driven by political, not educational, concerns.

Sadly, kids have long been favorite political pawns because anyone who might cut something like "education," which sounds so inherently good, is easily smeared as heartless. It's a tactic that feeds off of people's rational ignorance. Unlike the Secretary of Education, average Americans don't have the time to mine statistics on our education "investment." Many simply trust that policymakers are doing what's best for children.

But as the chasm between sequestration rhetoric and reality illustrates, such trust is misplaced.