

Chattanooga Times Free Press (Tennessee)

October 2, 2011 Sunday

Cuts put poor students at risk

BYLINE: Esmi E. Deprez, Bloomberg News

SECTION: WIRE - GENERAL NEWS; Pg. A6

LENGTH: 607 words

NEW YORK -- Debbie Hunter, principal of Edward E. Taylor Elementary in Columbia, S.C., says federal spending cuts may reverse gains at her school where 99 percent of 257 students are so poor they qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

"We have to be real mindful that the kids we are educating now are the people who are going to be running the country one day," Hunter, 53, said in a telephone interview. "Funding cuts tell students that education isn't important."

The worst-case scenario: \$3.5 billion in education spending reductions that will happen automatically if members of a deficit-targeting supercommittee can't agree on an alternative, said Joel Packer, executive director at the Committee for Education Funding in Washington. That would be the biggest one-time cut ever in federal school programs, he said.

The supercommittee's deliberations are likely to harm the poor disproportionately, who are more reliant on federal dollars, Hunter and other educators say.

The automatic cuts that would follow deadlock include a \$1.1 billion, or 7.8 percent, reduction in Title 1 funding, which helps schools with large populations of low-income students by providing extra support. School districts with substantial poor populations are "significantly more vulnerable to federal action," Fitch Ratings said in a Sept. 21 report.

Regardless of the outcome, reduction of education spending is inevitable, said Trey Grayson, director of the Institute of Politics at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government in Cambridge, Mass. That's because unlike Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, school spending is discretionary, he said.

"Education funding will likely be hit no matter what, if they come to a decision or they don't," said Grayson, who served as Kentucky's secretary of state from 2003 until this year.

Not everyone agrees that less money for schools equates to lower achievement. For Neal McCluskey, an education analyst at the Cato Institute, which advocates for limited

government and market-based reform in education, federal cuts will have "no meaningful effect" on academic outcomes.

Federal staffing data show that as the ratio of school district employees to students fell to one worker for every 7.8 pupils in 2008, from 13.6 in 1969, as national achievement scores for 17-year-olds remained stagnant, he said.

"There is no educational justification for protecting education from absolutely necessary spending cuts," McCluskey said in a telephone interview from Washington. "We've been piling billion of dollars into a system that doesn't produce the results we want, and it'd be more efficient to let taxpayers keep that money."

Twenty-one states, out of 24 for which data is available, are providing less per-student funding to local school districts for kindergarten through 12th-grade education this year than last, while 17 are providing less than before the recession began, according to the Center on Budget report. State funds make up about 47 percent of the nation's total education expenditures, the center said.

Governors recommended cutting K-12 funding by \$2.5 billion and higher education by \$5 billion more in 2012, after slicing \$1.8 billion and \$1.2 billion, respectively, in 2011, according to the National Association of State Budget Officers.

"Even the most optimistic predictions don't see funding levels getting up to pre-recession levels before the end of the decade," said Jim Hull, senior policy analyst at the National School Boards Association in Alexandria, Va. "The combination of lower property values and reductions in state funding has really put the squeeze on our public schools."