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## Democrats Warn of Harm to Education From Across-the-Board Budget Cuts

*By Paul Basken*

Education Secretary Arne Duncan joined Senate Democrats on Wednesday in warning of dire effects on American schools and colleges if Congress cannot reach agreement on a way to avoid automatic across-the-board budget cuts set for January.

Some \$1.2-trillion in threatened cuts, under a process known as sequestration, are scheduled to begin kicking in next year under an [agreement reached by Congress](#) last August to [force down the size of the federal budget deficit](#). Along with deep cuts in federal aid to local schools that could cost 15,000 teaching jobs, the effects on higher education would include the loss of about 2,200 research grants and snarls in the processing of federal student aid, Mr. Duncan told a Senate hearing.

"Essentially we're playing chicken with the lives of the American people," the secretary told lawmakers at the hearing, held by the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on labor, health, and education issues.

The subcommittee's chairman, Sen. Tom Harkin, Democrat of Iowa, issued his own report at the hearing, a 180-page tally of the specific effects Congress can expect if it does not find an alternative to the sequestration cuts.

Among a range of cuts in educational and health benefits for millions of children and young adults, sequestration would mean that 1.1 million fewer students would be served through the State Grants for Career and Technical Education program, 110,000 fewer low-income students would receive Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, and nearly 52,000 fewer students would get Federal Work-Study money, Mr. Harkin said in his report.

Sequestration would have "destructive impacts on the whole array of federal activities that promote and protect the middle class in this country," he said.

## **Bipartisan Concern**

Members of both parties created the sequestration mechanism last August as [part of a temporary settlement](#) of a bitter dispute over the size and shape of the budget. In a bid to force compromise, Democrats accepted that sequestration would include a series of domestic programs, and Republicans agreed it would include cuts in defense spending.

As the effective date of sequestration draws near, however, members of both parties are showing concern. Along with the protests from Mr. Harkin and other Democrats, some Republicans have begun urging that the Pentagon now be exempted from the sequestration process.

Mr. Duncan's appearance before the subcommittee on Wednesday consisted largely of fellow Democrats' endorsing his concern over the pending cuts in education and other programs. The secretary was followed by a four-member panel that consisted of local school superintendents in North Carolina and Texas, the head of a community-aid group in Virginia, and a strategist with the Cato Institute, a prominent libertarian think tank.

The Cato official, Neal P. McCluskey, offered the most robust defense of cutting education spending, arguing that federal data show it produces little value. Mr. McCluskey cited federal statistics indicating that the performance of American students on internationally comparable tests has not increased in 40 years, while per-student spending has grown 375 percent over that period.

He also cited a 1998 report by Austan D. Goolsbee, a former economic adviser in the Obama administration who is now a professor of economics at the University of Chicago, suggesting that the main benefit of increasing federal spending on scientific research is that it raises wages for researchers.

"Like aid to students," Mr. McCluskey said, "the benefits seem largely to accrue to those employed by the money, not to society or the people the aid is intended to help."

Democrats largely left the comments unchallenged. Mr. Harkin did question Mr. McCluskey's conclusions, but directed his most lengthy complaint to a disagreement with Mr. McCluskey over rates of fraud in the Head Start program.

Outside experts, however, disputed Mr. McCluskey's suggestion that American education results could be directly compared with those of other countries, given that U.S public schools face greater social challenges due to the nation's ethnic diversity.

"Simply correlating education outcomes with education spending across states or over time is a potentially misleading method," Tino Sanandaji, a postdoctoral fellow in economics at the University of Chicago, said in an interview after the hearing.

*Correction (7/25/2012, 6:30 p.m.):* The original version of this article misreported the size of the cuts that would take effect in January as \$1.2-billion. The sequestration process calls for cuts of \$1.2-trillion over a period of nine years.