

Education Vs. Bureaucracy

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Waste: How can a 375% education spending increase over four decades result in flat-lined reading, math and science scores? Because all that largesse feeds a bureaucratic monster sheltered from competition.

According to Neal McCluskey, the associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, the education spending much of the American public believes to be a vital investment in the country's future, actually "gives money to a catatonic heap of warm bodies and says, 'Stay the way you are.'"

In touting his jobs bill, President Obama calls on audiences to "tell Congress to pass this bill and put teachers back in the classroom where they belong."

But speaking to a Cato policy conference in New York City last Friday, McCluskey made no bones about federal education spending being bad for kids and bad for the economy — a big reason being that much of the spending goes not to real teachers or principals but to those holding an array of bureaucratic "support" positions.

McCluskey, author of "Feds in the Classroom: How Big Government Corrupts, Cripples, and Compromises American Education," praised the Senate for last month defeating the \$35 billion education employee portion of Obama's so-called American Jobs Act (while warning that a \$30 billion school infrastructure measure might still pass).

"How can it be good for students throughout the country to lose teachers, principals, secretaries," McCluskey asked, not to mention "periodic assessment associates (a real New York City job), labor support unit consultants, talent research and evaluation managers, and, employees for the Law and Order Administrative Trials Unit?"

Because those "jobs" are what the real federal spending per pupil of 375% since 1970 has largely gone toward — the invention and support of mysterious bureaucratic positions like "instructional aide" (of which there has been an almost 12-fold increase per-pupil) rather than to honest-to-goodness teaching.

Public school employment has increased at 10 times the rate of enrollment, with a massive expansion in administrative staff. All this dwarfs the much-bemoaned "cuts" achieved from time to time over the years.

Beyond ever-expanding, militantly union-supported bureaucracy, McCluskey is quick to stress that "the main problem of public schools is not bureaucracy but lack of competition."

Contrarian education scholars like McCluskey have insisted for decades that vouchers and other forms of school choice made available to low- and middle-income parents would not only give pupils a way out of the disastrous shortcomings of so many public school systems in the nation, especially in the poorer urban areas, but would force the public schools themselves to improve.

Overall, per-pupil spending has risen from \$5,671 in 1970, according to McCluskey, to \$12,922 in 2007-08 — a 128% rise — and public school employment has been 10 times the rate of student enrollment. Meanwhile, school district administrative staff per pupil has doubled.

What has all that presumably well-intentioned government education spending and "hiring of teachers" bought the American taxpayer? Stagnant reading, math and science scores for 17-year-olds over the last 40 years, as irrefutably shown in statistics from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which McCluskey concedes is "a very incomplete measure, but is also Washington's own measuring stick."

Funneling more federal money to local institutions only feeds the monster. "Rather than allowing economic conditions to force a little trimming of the suffocating bureaucracies," McCluskey warns, "it wraps them in insulation and tells them, 'no need to change here!'"

So this latest "economic stimulus/jobs bill" from a president supposedly dedicated to "change" and "hope" would only protect and worsen a hopeless public education status quo.