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On The Right

Public Schools Eat Too Much At Gov't Trough

By [NEAL MCCLUSKEY](#) Posted 09/23/2011 06:25 PM ET

Soon after his boss introduced the American Jobs Act, Vice President Joe Biden held a conference call to get teachers' unions behind it.

It was an easy task, with American Federation of Teachers honcho Randi Weingarten promising to "do whatever we can" to get the legislation passed. And why not? It's teachers and other politically potent interests, not kids or the economy, that the Act is really about.

That teachers' unions are gung-ho about the proposal — which would furnish \$30 billion for education jobs and another \$25 billion for school buildings — doesn't necessarily mean it's a bad thing. Kids need teachers and classrooms, right?

Sure. But we all need food, too, yet we can eat too much, or scarf down the wrong things, and end up sick as dogs. And for the last several decades public schools have been throwin' down Twinkies like they're going out of style.

Look at staffing. According to the federal Digest of Education Statistics, between 1969 and 2008 (the latest year with available data) public schools went from 22.6 students per teacher to 15.3. District administrative staff went from 697.7 students per employee to just 363.3. In total, students per employee dropped from 13.6 to 7.8.

And what happened to achievement? Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress — the "nation's report card" — flatlined for 17-year-olds, our schools' "final products."

But those employment figures are just through 2008. Haven't the last few years truly devastated education employment? We don't have perfect numbers, but what we do have says no.

The 2009 "stimulus," recall, included \$100 billion for education, most of which went to elementary and secondary schooling. A year later, the Feds allocated another \$10 billion

to keep education employment intact. Oodles of education jobs probably were created or preserved.

Unemployment rates support that. Bureau of Labor Statistics data for April — a month when most schools are in session — show that the rates in "education services" (which includes K-12, colleges and other training) were 4.8% in 2009, 4.2% in 2010 and 3.8% in 2011.

Education unemployment has been falling, and has been below not just overall unemployment, but unemployment for people with college degrees. In April 2011, the unemployment rate for the latter was 4.5%.

Assuming that staffing has been roughly constant since 2008, what would the magnitude of the cut be if the Obama administration's worst-case scenario — 280,000 lost positions — came true?

Small, especially since the administration is talking not just about teachers, but also "guidance counselors, classroom assistants, after-school personnel, tutors, and literacy and math coaches." Most of those positions are considered "instructional" and "support" staff, and in 2008 there were 6,182,785 such employees. Losing 280,000 would be just a 4.5% trimming. And that's the worst-case scenario.

So much for employment. How about crumbling schools?

Many public schools are in terrible shape, but not for lack of funds: Public school spending rose from \$5,671 per student in 1970-71 to \$12,922 in 2007-08. Much of that went to pay for all the new employees, but facilities spending ballooned as well.

Where'd the money go?

It's hard to know for sure, but too often not dull maintenance. Instead, it went to glory projects such as the \$578 million Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools complex in Los Angeles, which boasts such educationally essential features as talking benches that explain the site's history (Robert Kennedy was shot at the hotel that once stood there), and an auditorium that mimics the Cocoanut Grove nightclub.

Politicians simply don't star in golden-shovel groundbreaking when bathroom stalls are replaced. They do get such free publicity when opulent buildings are erected. And while the Jobs Act wouldn't fund new buildings, it would bail out districts that long traded function for flash, and would pay for spiffy new science labs and other glitzy additions. And naturally, all the work would have to be done at union rates.

This makes no educational sense. It also makes no economic sense: Taxpayers would ultimately have to pay for the Jobs Act, meaning money would be taken from the people who earned it and given to infamous squanderers. That almost certainly means a net loss of jobs.

But this isn't really about education or job growth. It's about politics. At least, that's all that the evidence allows you to conclude.

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