

For the nation's sake, cut education spending

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If President Obama cares about restoring sanity to federal finances, he will demand deep cuts to education spending. That's right: In tonight's State of the Union address, he will call to axe most of Washington's educationally worthless outlays.

Unfortunately, Mr. Obama is likely to prove that he doesn't care all that much about attacking the nation's crushing debt. According to several sources, he'll not only place education spending off limits, he might make increasing it a focal point of tonight's address.

But wait: Debt or no debt, isn't having an educated citizenry crucial to the nation's future? Isn't he right to protect education funding?

Education is, indeed, very important. But while Washington spends huge sums on things that are education-related, the riches produce almost nothing of educational value. If anything, the feds keep stuffing donuts into an already obese system.

Federal elementary and secondary education spending has risen mightily since the early 1970s, when Washington first started immersing itself in education. In 1970, according to the federal Digest of Education Statistics, Uncle Sam spent an inflation-adjusted \$31.5 billion on public K-12 education. By 2009 that had ballooned to \$82.9 billion.

On a per-pupil basis, in 1970 the feds spent \$435 per student. By 2006 — the latest year with available data — it was \$1,015, a 133 percent increase. And it's not like state and local spending was dropping: Real, overall, per-pupil spending rose from \$5,593 in 1970 to \$12,463 in 2006, and today we beat almost every other industrialized nation in education funding.

What do we have to show for this?

Certainly more public school employees: Between 1969 and 2007, pupil-to-staff ratios were close to halved. Not coincidentally, these same people politick powerfully for ever more spending and against reforms that will challenge their bloated monopoly. They also routinely defeat efforts to hold them accountable for results.

This constant feeding of special interests is why we've gotten zilch in the outcome that really matters — learning. Since the early 1970s, scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress — the "Nation's Report Card" — have been utterly stagnant for 17-year-olds, our schools' "final products." In 1973 the average math score was 304 (out of 500). In 2008 it was just 306. In reading, the 1971 average was 285. In 2008 it was up a single point, hitting 286.

The higher education tale is much the same, especially for student aid, the primary college dumping ground for federal dollars. According to the College Board, in 1971

Washington provided \$3,814 in inflation-adjusted aid per full-time equivalent student. By 2009-10 that figure had more than tripled, hitting \$12,894.

By most available indicators this has been money down the drain. For instance, only about 58 percent of bachelor's seekers finish their programs within six years, if at all. Literacy levels among people with degrees are low and falling. And colleges have raised their prices at astronomical rates to capture ever-growing aid.

What's the total damage?

It's impossible to know exactly because so many federal programs touch on education, but the Digest provides a decent estimate. In the 2008-09 academic year, Washington spent roughly \$83 billion on K-12 education and \$37 billion on higher education. (The latter, notably, excludes student-loan funds that fuel the tuition skyrocket but generally get repaid, as well as federally funded research conducted at universities.) Add those together and you get \$120 billion, a sum that's doing no educational good and, therefore, leaves no excuse for not applying it to our \$14 trillion debt.

And yet, it seems President Obama will not only protect education spending, he might fight to increase it. Why?

He could certainly believe that huge spending on education is a good thing. That, though, might mean he hasn't looked at all at what we've gotten for our money.

Unfortunately, it might also be that education is the easiest of all issues through which to buy political capital, whether from special interests like teachers' unions, or busy parents who don't have time to research what education funds actually produce. It's also ideal for demonizing opponents who might demand discomfiting fiscal discipline.

Of course, misguided intentions and political exploitation have been at work for decades in education, so this isn't new. We are now well past the point where we can ignore results. Today, we simply cannot afford to keep throwing money away.

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