

Education waste: We have only ourselves to blame

By NEAL MCCLUSKEY

There's a curious line in the summary of President Barack Obama's proposed fiscal 2012 Department of Education budget. "Now more than ever," it reads, "we cannot waste taxpayer dollars on programs that do not work." It's curious because no federal education programs appear to work, yet the Obama administration is proposing to increase Education Department spending from \$64 billion to \$77 billion. It's a bankrupting contradiction, but don't get angry at Obama: We only have ourselves to blame.

Educational outcomes prove that federal education involvement has practically been the definition of profligate spending.

First, elementary and secondary schooling. While real, federal per-pupil expenditures have more than doubled since the early 1970s, the scores of 17-year-olds on the National Assessment of Educational Progress – the so-called "Nation's Report Card" – have been pancake flat. We've spent tons with no educational returns to show. We have, though, got bloat such as a near doubling of school employees per-student, and opulent buildings like the half-billion-dollar Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools complex that opened in Los Angeles last year.

In higher education, the federal government has focused on providing financial aid to make college more affordable. The problem is, policymakers have ignored basic economics. The more Washington gives to students, the higher schools can raise their prices, wiping out the value of the aid.

In addition to being a major cause of the disease it wants to cure, Washington has fostered higher-ed failure by encouraging an increasing number of people often unready for college to pursue degrees. That's a likely reason the most recent federal assessment of adult literacy recorded big literacy drops from 1992-2003 among Americans with at least a bachelor's degree. It's also no doubt a significant factor behind only about 56 percent of students in four-year programs completing their studies in six years.

Wasting federal dollars on schools is not, importantly, exclusively a Democratic problem. Both parties have used education spending to try to signal that they "care" about Americans, especially cute little child-Americans. And while the House GOP has identified about \$4.9 billion in cuts for the Education Department, that's less than 8 percent off the Department's \$64 billion budget.

So how is all this the fault of the American people? Isn't the real problem that politicians lack integrity and will try to buy votes using things that sound wonderful even if they're toxic?

While it would be nice if politicians would start looking at results and stop throwing money into black holes, but the fact is they're human, and, like all of us, they ultimately want what is best for themselves. For politicians that's votes, and when it comes to education Americans don't like cuts.

When presented with several federal undertakings that could be targets for deficit-reducing cuts in a recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll, education finished second only to Social Security for protection. A full 63 percent of respondents wanted no education reductions, versus 13 percent calling for "major" cuts. In contrast, the top candidate for gutting – foreign aid – saw 11 percent of people call for no reductions and 52 percent demand major slashing.

Why do Americans want more of a bad thing? The problem is, they don't know it's bad.

As with most things you buy, people generally expect that spending more on education will get a better product. Moreover, the public constantly hears, especially from huge special interests like teachers' unions, that our schools have been surviving on table scraps for decades. It's no surprise, then, that average Americans – people with jobs, families, and lots of other pressing concerns that make analyzing education policy hugely cost prohibitive – recoil at the idea of taking money from schools.

But take we must, because federal money does no discernable educational good, and our nation can simply no longer afford pointless spending.

Unfortunately, there is only one way to get sustained sanity in federal policy, and it will require slow, hard work. People who know the reality of federal education spending must tell others about it as forcefully and clearly as possible. They must change the public's attitude so that what's in politicians' self-interest will also

change. Ultimately, federal politicians must be rewarded not for giving away dollars in the name of education, but for leaving them in the hands of hardworking taxpayers.