

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## Neal McCluskey: Young pawns in sequestration fight

By NEAL MCCLUSKEY / For the Register

Federal education involvement seems to be all sweetness and light, focused on helping the most innocent and needy of Americans. But, as sequestration is bearing out, reality is often quite the opposite: it's about exploiting "the children" for political gain.

In an ongoing rhetorical effort to whip up hysteria about sequestration, Education Secretary Arne Duncan was caught this week in an outright fabrication. "There are literally teachers now who are getting pink slips, who are getting notices that they can't come back this fall," Duncan told CBS' Sunday talk show. The Washington Post reported Thursday that Duncan's claim is bogus: when pressed, he could only specify five or six teaching jobs already slated to be cut in one West Virginia county, and admitted, "Whether it's all sequester-related, I really don't know."

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Such a revelation is in keeping with the overwrought rhetoric of the entire Obama administration, which makes it seem as if an \$85 billion reduction to a \$3.6 trillion budget would cut us back to the Stone Age. Especially when it comes to education, there's simply no basis for such talk.

Let's start with the size of the cuts.

Under sequestration, federal education spending is slated to be reduced by about 5 percent. Almost any business in America could find a way to trim that much without seriously affecting its core operations.

But that's just the federal portion of education funding, meaning the overall cut would be even smaller. While it spends too much, Washington provides only about 10 percent of total elementary and secondary funding. Multiply that by 5 percent, and you get just a half-percent overall reduction.

Are we truly supposed to believe that schools can't find a way to make a half-percent trim without robbing children of their futures?

Over the past roughly 40 years, we've seen huge increases in public school staffing that have dropped student-to-employee ratios from around 14-to-1 to just 8-to-1. Even more telling, according to the latest available federal data, inflation-adjusted spending per-pupil rose from \$5,726 to \$13,141 in the same timeframe – a 129 percent increase that utterly dwarfs a half-percent divot.

At least academic achievement increased in that time, right? Wrong: According to the federal government's own National Assessment of Educational Progress, scores for seventeen-year-olds, our schools' "final products," were almost completely static. In a nutshell, massive increases in spending have had no discernible impact on student achievement.

In light of this, it is almost impossible to conclude that Duncan's rhetoric is driven by educational concerns. No, it is almost certainly political.

Cute, innocent kids have long been favorite political pawns because anyone who might cut something like "education," which sounds so inherently good, is easily smeared as heartless. It's a tactic that feeds off of people's rational ignorance. Unlike the secretary of education, average Americans – with jobs outside of

schooling and countless other areas demanding their tax dollars – don't have the time to mine statistics on our education "investment." Many simply trust that policymakers are doing what's best for the children.

Sadly, as the huge chasm between sequestration rhetoric and reality illustrates, such trust is seriously misplaced.

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