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Why should education be exempt from recession budgeting?

By George F. Will
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Jay Gould, a 19th-century railroad tycoon and unrepentant rascal, said he was a Democrat when in Democratic districts and a Republican when in Republican districts but that he was always for the Erie Railroad. Gould, emblematic of Gilded Age rapaciousness, was called a robber baron. What should we call people whose defining constancy is that they are always for unionized public employees? Call them Democrats.

This week, when Congress returns from its Memorial Day recess, many Democrats, having gone an eternity -- more than a week -- without spending billions of their constituents' money, will try to make up for lost time by sending another \$23 billion to states to prevent teachers from being laid off. [The alternative to this "desperately" needed bailout, says Education Secretary Arne Duncan, is "catastrophe."](#) Amazing. Just 16 months ago, in the stimulus legislation, Congress shoveled about \$100 billion to education, including \$48 billion in direct aid to states. [According to a University of Washington study, this saved more than 342,000 teaching and school staff positions](#) -- about 5.5 percent of all the positions in America's 15,000 school systems.

The federal component of education spending on kindergarten through 12th grade, the quintessential state and local responsibility, has doubled since 2000, to 15 percent. Now the supposed emergency, and states' dependency, may be becoming routine and perpetual.

Duncan says that without the \$23 billion, 100,000 to 300,000 public school teachers and staff will lose their jobs. But [Neal McCluskey of the Cato Institute says 300,000 would mean a cut of just 4.8 percent of the teachers and staff](#) nationwide; 100,000 would mean cuts of 1.6 percent.

Although the public education lobby's cry of "Parsimony!" is not much of an argument, it is persuasive to Democrats comfortable in a relationship of co-dependency with teachers unions. But before Congress is stampeded into spending yet more (borrowed) billions, it should read ["The Phony Funding Crisis" in the journal Education Next by James W. Guthrie, a professor at Southern Methodist University, and Arthur Peng, a research associate](#). They say:

"For the past hundred years, with rare and short exceptions and after controlling for inflation, public schools have had both more money and more employees per student in each succeeding year." Indeed, public schools have been so insulated from economic downturns that "there have been 11 periods during which GDP declined but mean total real per-pupil revenues still increased."

Primary and secondary education is given privileged status in most state constitutions, some of which declare it the "paramount duty" of the legislature. Between 2001 and 2007, in 12 states the number of teachers rose while the number of students fell. In another six states, teachers were hired much faster

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than enrollment increased: In Virginia, enrollment grew 5 percent, the number of teachers 21 percent. In Florida, the numbers were 6 percent and 20 percent; in North Carolina, 9 percent and 22 percent.

In New York state between 2000 and 2009, public schools added 15,000 teachers while enrollment was declining by 121,000 pupils. By 2008, New York's pupil-teacher ratio (13:1) was eighth lowest among the states, and its per-pupil spending (\$16,000) was the nation's highest.

While the private sector has shed 8.5 million jobs -- 7.4 percent of workers -- during the recession, local governments have lost only 141,000, less than 1 percent. Duncan says the \$23 billion is for an "emergency." But, then, what isn't an emergency nowadays? The Senate just passed a \$60 billion "emergency" supplemental appropriation for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are "emergencies" as Washington understands that term: They are regularly recurring surprises. Watch for an attempt to attach the \$23 billion for teachers to the war-funding bill.

We are witnessing a familiar government dance, the Prosperity-to-Hysteria Two-Step: When revenue grows, governments put in place permanent spending streams; when revenue falls, governments exclaim that any retrenchment, even back to spending levels of a few years ago, is a "catastrophe." [The National Education Association, a net subtraction from the national mind, has a television ad](#) featuring children dressed in suits and ties:

Kid 1: Maybe Congress would listen to us . . .

Kid 2: If I was a Wall Street banker . . .

Kid 3: Or a car company CEO

The largest teachers union gets an F for grammar -- the correct subjunctive mood would be "If I *were* a Wall Street banker" -- but it understands the logic of public life in the bailout era: If anyone gets to the trough, everyone is entitled to get there.

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