



Maybe education cuts wouldn't be so bad

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With the release of today's "skinny budget" we are likely to hear the usual coverage: "Good-Sounding Program X is being cut by Y million dollars. 'These cuts will be devastating,' said someone who gets money through X."

Cuts to education programs, which instinctively sound awful because education is generally a good thing, are especially susceptible to this.

But focusing on the immediate recipients of the money, and maybe the good intentions behind the programs, is a terrible way to approach government spending. It ignores that resources are finite, and every government use competes with other uses that may be equally good or better, including what taxpayers may have spent the money on had they been able to keep it.

School choice works, but the danger of federalized choice is huge.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to show someone not spending money on a new car, or investing in a new business, because the dough has gone to an after-school program, or a college Work Study job. So news reports basically ignore opportunity costs.

That problem now off my chest, let's look at a few of the education items in the Trump administration's thin proposal:

\$250 million for a new private school voucher program, \$168 million more for charter schools

School choice works, but the danger of federalized choice is huge. It threatens to homogenize private schools through regulation, and a federal effort could eventually grow large enough to crowd out state programs, killing the competition and innovation that comes through state — "laboratories of democracy" — policymaking. Like almost all federal education meddling, it also would be unconstitutional: the Constitution gives Washington no power to govern or fund education, including school choice.

Eliminate the 21st Century Community Learning Centers

This \$1.2 billion program, which supplies funds for before- and after-school programs as well as summer programming, cries out for elimination. Not only is it unconstitutional and in no way

something states could not do on their own, but federal evaluations have found that it may have negative effects. As I have discussed before, a 2005 evaluation stated:

“This study finds that elementary students who were randomly assigned to attend the 21st Century Community Learning Centers after-school program were more likely to feel safe after school, no more likely to have higher academic achievement, no less likely to be in self-care, more likely to engage in some negative behaviors, and experience mixed effects on developmental outcomes relative to students who were not randomly assigned to attend the centers.”

Eliminate the Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant and reduce Work Study

Of course these programs — one provides grants to students, the other funding for student jobs — are unconstitutional, but they are also counterproductive. Like all federal student aid programs, they enable schools to boost prices or redirect other aid, and they incentivize students to think less intensely about whether they should go to college, what they study, and how quickly they finish.

They are not the main culprits — both are quite small relative to other student aid programs — but they are subsidies nonetheless, and starting with small programs is a good way to ease into the bigger cuts we need. It is also difficult to justify giving taxpayer money to students, even in exchange for some sort of work, when the average payoff of graduating from college is around \$1 million. At the very least, shouldn't beneficiaries of aid have to repay taxpayers? The feds offer loans, after all. (Of course, they should be eliminated, too.)

Trim TRIO Programs and GEAR UP

These programs are supposed to help low-income students prepare for, and access, college. Again, there is no constitutional authority for their existence, and states or civil society could handle the job. But the evidence on the programs' effectiveness is also pretty poor. As I testified to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, recent official assessments have often used weak research methods, and better ones have found uninspiring effects.

The people who benefit directly from federal programs will no doubt be unhappy with threatened cuts affecting them, and they will likely be featured in news coverage. But for the country, many of these proposed cuts may well be good news.

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