



Opinion: Yes ---- you absolutely can, in good conscience, cut the federal education budget

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Release of the Trump administration's education budget proposal, which would make about \$9 billion in cuts, has been met with unfortunately predictable moral condemnation. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, declared the budget proposal "manifestly cruel to kids." President Obama's second education secretary, John King, called it "an assault on the American dream" and said, "no one in good conscience could ... say this budget makes sense for the interests of students and the long-term interest of the country."

Simply out of fairness to those with whom we disagree, and to make our national dialogue less poisonous, it is time to cease such incendiary, politically weaponized rhetoric. People can have other views than we do without being heartless or evil. We must also steer clear of debate-ending condemnation for the sake of good policy: while the intent behind most federal education spending is laudable, the consequences far too often do not seem to be.

Consider student aid programs, which Trump's budget would cut by, among other things, limiting the growth of Pell Grants, reducing Work-Study, and ending Public Service Loan Forgiveness.

A normal, gut reaction is that such cuts would make college less affordable, and in the short-term they might. But logic, and considerable empirical evidence, make a potent case that aid programs are a major reason that college is so expensive. Federal aid has enabled institutions to raise their prices as breakneck rates, often driven by a desire to do things they think are valuable, but also to make the lives of employees more comfortable, and to furnish sometimes extraordinary amenities that heavily subsidized students demand. "Aid," in other words, may well be self-defeating ... or worse.

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Or take the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, a \$1.2 billion effort to fund after-school programming. Again the intention is laudable, and proposing to end the program at first blush sounds cruel. But just as with student aid, we need to ask if the program works, among other things, before declaring elimination good or bad. What federal studies have found is essentially no positive outcomes and a negative impact on student behavior.

There is, indeed, little evidence that the overall federal role in education has been positive. While federal spending has ballooned over the last several decades, test scores for 17-year-olds—essentially the K-12 system’s “final products”—have been stagnant. In higher education, prices have ballooned and debt along with them, while the percentage of low-income students completing four-year degrees has remained tiny and credentials have been rendered increasingly hollow.

Even if programs work, there can be many morally fine reasons to trim or eliminate them.

One is how we pay for them. By constantly deficit spending we have been funding programs for today in part with money taken from future generations. It is hard to see that as self-evidently the morally right thing to do.

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How things are done is also important, unless we believe that the ends — or even just good intentions — always justify the means. For policymaking, the means must be the rule of law, and that requires obeying the Constitution. But nowhere in the Constitution, including the enumerated powers, is education mentioned, much less authority given to Washington to get involved. And no, the “general welfare” clause and other seemingly broad warrants of power do not give sanction to federal education programs. As James Madison wrote in Federalist no. 41:

For what purpose could the enumeration of particular powers be inserted, if these and all others were meant to be included in the preceding general power? Nothing is more natural nor common than first to use a general phrase, and then to explain and qualify it by a recital of particulars.

Maintaining the rule of law is a major reason to object to the budget’s roughly \$1.4 billion school choice provisions. Choice is good, empowering families and communities to decide for themselves what education truly means and how they will get it.

But outside of the District of Columbia, for military-connected children, and for Native American communities, this does not make funding it any more the purview of the federal government than the myriad other things Washington does in the name of education.

The case for cutting federal education spending is powerful, with federal programs often producing poor outcomes with money taken from future generations and without Constitutional authority. But even if you disagree with that case, it is time to at least be fair: there is nothing immoral about it.

Indeed, it is just as focused on the good as are calls to keep the federal money flowing.

This story was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education

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