



Education Secretary decries sequestration

By: Greg Toppo – February 21, 2013

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan came out swinging Thursday, directing his harshest words at congressional lawmakers before what he calls "increasingly likely" mandatory spending cuts for "real kids, real teachers and real classrooms" from sequestration this March.

Speaking to reporters at a breakfast roundtable, Duncan said teachers are beginning to receive pink slips based on school districts' fears of sequestration, the mandated, across-the-board 5% cuts created by Congress to push lawmakers into a budget deal. "This stuff is real," he said.

A former Chicago schools CEO, Duncan blamed what he called "the height of dysfunction" in Congress: "There's no one in their right mind who would say this is good for kids and good for the country, yet somehow it becomes tenable in Washington. I just think people don't spend enough time in the real world. And if we spent more time in the real world, we wouldn't have this kind of intransigence here."

The Obama administration estimates that the automatic spending cuts would slice \$725 million from federal Title I programs for poor children, affecting 1.2 million students in 2,700 schools and putting the jobs of about 10,000 teachers at risk.

Also on the chopping block, according to Duncan: \$598 million for federal aid to disabled students, affecting an additional 7,200 teachers. Public schools on Indian land, as well as Department of Defense schools on military bases, which rely more directly than most on federal aid, could see the fallout more quickly — as soon as this spring, said Carmel Martin, a top Duncan aide. A few schools could even be forced to shorten their school day or school year, she said.

Duncan called the situation "very, very worrying," saying schools already operate with too few resources and personnel.

"The (school) day is too short. The year's too short. We don't have enough after-school. And now to say, 'OK, because we can't sit at a table and compromise and find some middle ground, we're just going to let a bunch of kids start to suffer and a bunch of teachers start to get pink slips?' How's that rational? How's that leadership? Is that why you ran for office and got elected and did all these things? Do you feel proud about that? I don't get it."

Andrew Coulson, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute, a Washington think-tank, said losing that many teachers won't have as devastating an effect as Duncan predicts.

The public school system has, in effect, hired too many people over the past four decades, he said. Since 1970, enrollment has grown by 8.5%, while employment has doubled, he said, with little to show in either higher high school graduation rates or a smaller achievement gap between poor and middle-class students.

"We have too many public school employees, not too few," Coulson said. "What we've done is to warehouse people in an ineffective, inefficient bureaucracy."

Duncan, a Harvard graduate who briefly played professional basketball in Australia, is fond of pointing out that U.S. students are locked in global competition with their counterparts in other developed countries. He invoked the image Thursday: "This is not what South Korea is doing right now. This is not what Singapore is doing right now. This is not what India is doing right now. This is not what China is doing right now. Do they care more about their kids and their education system than we do? This is a choice. We're making a choice to go down this path and it's mind-boggling to me that this possibility might actually become reality."

Mike Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a right-leaning Washington think-tank, said the scale of possible cuts would actually be smaller than what recession-weary districts have already experienced. Federal funding accounts for only about 10% of most budgets, so 5% of that is "pretty small" on an individual school basis.

He said the forced cuts might push districts to find "federal money spent on fluff" and get rid of it. "If a little bit of it goes away, schools are going to be able to adapt without making huge changes," he said. "This is not the end of the world as we know it — there are lots of ways to protect teacher jobs and still make cuts."