



SINCE
2008

*E tenebris
deserti,
lux candida.*

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Right on Cue, Reason on Federal Education Policy: la maladie n'est pas endémique



Via [Reason](#):

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan recently [claimed](#): “Districts around the country have literally been cutting for five, six, seven years in a row. And, many of them, you know, are through, you know, fat, through flesh and into bone”...

Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, writes that out of 14,000 school districts in the United States, just seven have cut their budgets seven years in a row. How about five years in a row? Just 87. That’s a fraction of 1 percent in each case.

Duncan may be pandering to his constituency, or he may actually be fooled by how school districts (and other government agencies) talk about budget cuts. When normal people hear about a budget cut, we assume the amount of money to be spent is less than the previous year’s allocation. But that’s not what bureaucrats mean.

“They are not comparing current year spending to the previous year’s spending,” Coulson [writes](#). “What they’re doing is comparing the approved current year budget to the budget that they initially dreamed about having.”

So if a district got more money than last year but less than it asked for, the administrators consider it a cut. “Back in the real world, a K-12 public education costs four times as much as it did in 1970, adjusting for inflation: \$150,000 versus the \$38,000 it cost four decades ago (in constant 2009 dollars),” Coulson says. [emphasis mine]

[Sound familiar?](#) More below the fold.

The article itself is about the falsity of an assumption that drives federal education policy (read: Race to the Top): that a lack of funds is the limiting factor when it comes to quality of public, K-12 education. Colorful anecdote ensues:

Consider the American Indian Public Charter School in Oakland, Calif. It was once a failing school, but now it’s one of the best in California. Ben Chavis turned it around without any additional money. His book, [Crazy Like a Fox](#), tells how.

He and Coulson will be guests on my FBN show tonight.

Chavis’ experience exposes the school establishment’s lies for what they are. **Nearly all of Chavis’ students are considered economically disadvantaged (98 percent qualify for free lunches), yet they have the fourth-highest test scores of any school in the state.**

“In Oakland this year, on the AP (advanced placement) exam, we had 100 percent of all the blacks and Mexicans in the city of Oakland who passed AP calculus,” Chavis said. “There are four high schools, and we’re the only ones who had anyone pass AP calc.”

Yet Chavis accomplishes this without the “certified” teachers so revered by the educational establishment. His classes are as big as, and sometimes bigger than, public school classes, but only a quarter of his teachers are certified by the state.

Money, he insists, is not the answer. “My buildings are shacks compared to their schools, but my schools are clean, and we’ll kick all their asses.”

He scoffs at the establishment’s solutions to the education problem, such as teacher evaluations.

“I don’t do no teacher evaluations. All I do is go into a class, and if the kids ain’t working, your ass is fired. (Most principals) sit for hours and say, ‘Is he meeting this goal, is he meeting’—I just go to class, and if the kids are not working ...” [emphasis mine]

The point is well taken. But, as is the wont of anecdotal evidence, the argument is also over-simplified. Without good teachers, engaged students, and a

certain amount of hard work, a quality education at any level will be elusive. However, with those conditions fulfilled, a little bit of dough does no harm. The problem with federal education policy is not the money per se, but rather the conditions it attaches to that money. We've [written](#) in some detail about the shortcomings of the Race to the Top program, especially in the context of Arizona. Mandating an increased reliance on the AIMS test and [subjecting local education agencies to more federal and state oversight](#) is not a good path for education reform because it necessarily elides the innumerable differences between students, communities, and the teachers who are charged with educating them. Ben Chavis knows his community, his teachers, and most importantly, his students, and this is why he gets results. Take it away Mr. Hayek, [drop that local knowledge](#):

We need to remember only how much we have to learn in any occupation after we have completed our theoretical training, how big a part of our working life we spend learning particular jobs, and how valuable an asset in all walks of life is knowledge of people, of local conditions, and of special circumstances. To know of and put to use a machine not fully employed, or somebody's skill which could be better utilized, or to be aware of a surplus stock which can be drawn upon during an interruption of supplies, is socially quite as useful as the knowledge of better alternative techniques. And the shipper who earns his living from using otherwise empty or half-filled journeys of tramp-steamers, or the estate agent whose whole knowledge is almost exclusively one of temporary opportunities, or the arbitrageur who gains from local differences of commodity prices, are all performing eminently useful functions based on special knowledge of circumstances of the fleeting moment not known to others.

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Post Published: 17 September 2010

Author: Vishal Ganesan

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