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Budgeted back into the Stone Age ... or 1998

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The end for public schooling is nigh! So, at least, declareth U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and the doom-echoers in the media.

Because of the country's horrendous economic situation, Duncan has repeatedly intoned, we are facing an "education catastrophe." Major media outlets such as [the New York Times](#) and [NBC Nightly News](#) have somberly repeated the laments. Indeed, it seems that we are facing a scenario so apocalyptic that it could throw our schools back to a state of being not seen since...1998.

1998? Shouldn't that be "the Great Depression," or maybe "the Paleolithic Era?"

Nope. Using the Secretary's own estimate of employment cuts – between 100,000 and 300,000 public-school employees – that could be forced by the recession for the next academic year, we can see how relatively minor those cuts would actually be.

In the 2007-08 school year – the most recent for which the federal Digest of Education Statistics has data – there were 7.9 students for every public-school employee. Decreasing [that year's staffing number](#) by 300,000, and using [estimated enrollment for 2010-11](#), one can calculate the student-to-staffer ratio under Duncan's worst-case scenario. It would rise to just 8.5 to 1, a proportion seen as recently as, yes, 1998.

Of course, we likely won't see the worst-case scenario. What year would the best case – 100,000 lost staffers – send us back to? 2003-04. And losing 200,000 jobs? That would nudge us back to just 2000-01.

Ah, but since the latest data is from 2007-08, there is obviously missing info. What happens if we incorporate jobs lost last year due to our economic troubles?

There probably were losses last year even after stimulus funding, but they likely weren't huge: According to a

[recent estimate from the Center on Reinventing Public Education](#), about 87,000 jobs were lost between the 08-09 and 09-10 school years. Adding this to the worst-case scenario would nudge the staff-to-student ratio up to 8.6 to 1, but still only take us back to 1998.

Some “catastrophe.”

So why isn’t the situation even remotely as bad as Secretary Duncan and the media Chicken Littles portray it? Because the secretary and media give no context whatsoever for their numbers, that’s why.

For one thing, in 2007-08 public schools employed more than 6.2 million people; even the 300,000 figure is tiny compared to that huge number.

More importantly, preceding our schools’ few recent years of financial woe were [decades of decadent plenty](#). According to inflation-adjusted federal data, in 1970-71 Americans spent \$5,593 per public-school student. By 2006-07 we were spending \$12,463 – a whopping 123 percent increase that bought lots of teachers, administrators, and other shiny things!

That said, even minor backsliding from this overwhelming trend could be truly alarming if increasing resources had been producing commensurate academic gains. But they hadn’t — as starkly illustrated by 17-year-olds stagnant National Assessment of Educational Progress. In 1973, their average math score was 304 (out of 500). In 2008 it was just 306. In reading, their average score in 1971 was 285. In 2008 it was just 286.

For all our huge spending and staffing increases, we have simply gotten no positive return.

With that ugly, and shamefully ignored, reality firmly in mind, as well as the relatively small size of potential staffing cuts, it should be clear that looming belt-tightening would be far from a doomsday scenario. Indeed, for long-beleaguered taxpayers, forcing schools to accept such cuts could be the start of a bright new day.

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