



Updated: Thu., May. 27, 2010, 4:43 AM

No, we don't need a teacher bailout

By NEIL McCLUSKEY

Last Updated: 4:43 AM, May 27, 2010

Posted: 1:33 AM, May 27, 2010

From the recent apocalyptic pro nouncements of Education Secretary Arne Duncan and others, you may think our schools are selling their last bits of chalk and playground sand to employ mere skeleton crews of teachers and staff. The truth is "apocalypse not."

Yes, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten last week warned that, without a huge infusion of federal cash, public schools face "draconian cuts." And the American Association of School Administrators declared a few weeks ago that without a bailout, job losses "would deal a devastating blow to public education."

Then there's Duncan's warning, while making the TV-news rounds last week, of educational "catastrophe" if a federal rescue isn't forthcoming. And now the National Education Association has launched something called "Speak Up for Education & Kids" -- a campaign to get people to call their congressmen and demand a handout for education.

The scaremongering is producing results. House Appropriations Chairman David Obey (D-Wisc.) is planning to put \$23 billion to save education jobs in a supplemental spending package. The move appears to have widespread Democratic support.

But let's look beyond the hysteria.

Duncan estimates that, absent a federal windfall, budget cuts will force layoffs of 100,000 to 300,000 public-school staff and teachers. The American Association of School Administrators has projected 275,000 layoffs under current conditions.

Sounds pretty terrible: Six-digit job losses are certainly nothing to sneeze at, and no one wants to see people unemployed.

But these numbers -- and the prophesying of Duncan & Co. -- ignore some critical context.

The federal Digest of Education Statistics tells us that in the 2007-08 school year (the latest with available data), US public schools employed more than 6.2 million teachers and other staff. Losing 300,000 of those jobs would only be a 4.8 percent cut -- unfortunate, perhaps, but hardly catastrophic.

And 300,000 is the worst-case scenario. The AASA figure of 275,000 would be just a 4.4 percent cut. The low end of Duncan's prediction, 100,000 positions, would constitute only a 1.6 percent trim. That's less than one out of every 60 public-school jobs.

Moreover, the projected cuts would be but a tiny step back after decades of spending and staffing leaps.

Between the 1970-71 school year and 2006-07, inflation-adjusted US public-school spending more than doubled, from \$5,593 to \$12,463 per pupil. The number of staff per pupil ballooned about 70 percent.

This might have been a fine investment -- had it produced anything approaching commensurate improvements in achievement. But it didn't, according to scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress -- the so-called Nation's Report Card.

Indeed, while resources were blasted into the schools with a fire hose, test scores for 17-year-olds -- essentially, our schools' "final products" -- remained almost completely unchanged.

So the supposedly huge cuts we're facing are actually pretty small, and we've been pouring money and people into schools for decades without producing any improvements. Those are reasons enough to say "no way" to any federal bailout.

But that's not all the context that taxpayers deserve before Congress and the Obama administration stick them for another \$23 billion. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act -- the "stimulus" -- already included about \$100 billion for education, most of which was intended solely to keep educators employed.

So there is indeed a looming education catastrophe -- but it's not funding or job cuts. It is the bailout now moving through Congress that ignores the reality of inefficient public schooling, and adds to the already crushing burden of our federal debt.

Unfortunately, none of that seems to matter to Duncan & Co., who no doubt know the truth yet continue their Chicken Little act. All that matters to them, apparently, is that the unionized public-schooling establishment stays fat and happy.

Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Free dom, is author of "Feds in the Classroom: How Big Government Corrupts, Cripples and Compromises American Education."