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MCCLUSKEY: End Fed ED

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President Obama recently announced that his proposed fiscal 2011 budget would freeze all non-defense discretionary spending. All, that is, except spending on education, and by default, the department that handles most of the money. It's an exception that casts considerable doubt on both the president's seriousness about killing wasteful spending, and his grasp of federal education reality.

With the national debt a gargantuan \$12.4 trillion - or \$40,200 for every American - it should be painfully obvious that Washington needs to cut every red cent of nonessential spending. Yet Mr. Obama's budget calls for an \$18.6 billion increase in Education Department spending over 2010, with a total appropriation of nearly \$78 billion.

But wait - isn't education "essential?" Yes, but federal involvement absolutely is not.

For one thing, except for granting jurisdiction over the District of Columbia and empowering the feds to prohibit schooling discrimination by states, the Constitution gives Washington zero authority to meddle in education. That means every federal education program, and the department itself, is unconstitutional.

Of course, these days mentioning that the Constitution gives Washington no authority to do something is like telling a drunk that chugging Long Island ice teas is verboten. It's completely accurate, gets to the root of the problem, but will almost certainly be ignored.

The Founders gave the feds no education power for good reason. They knew that a national government couldn't effectively govern education or anything else that works best when tailored to the unique needs of individual people and communities.

History has borne their wisdom out. Since the 1965 passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act - of which No Child Left Behind is just a continuation - federal education expenditures have been like the Alps, but academic outcomes like the Bonneville Salt Flats. Since 1970, inflation-adjusted federal spending per-pupil has risen almost 190 percent, while academic performance by 17-year-olds - our schools' "final products" - has stagnated.

How have things been in higher education? In particular, what have we gotten from decades of the federal grants, loans, work-study, and tax incentives through which Mr. Obama would like to furnish college students with more than \$173 billion in 2011?

More people have certainly gone to college: In 1960 - five years before passage of the seminal Higher Education Act - only 7.7 percent of Americans ages 25 and older had bachelor's degrees. By 2008, nearly 30 percent did. But that credential explosion has come at a steep, self-defeating cost.

First, there's a glut of degree holders: According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only about 21 percent of jobs require bachelor's degrees - bad news for the tens of millions of surplus B.A. and B.S. holders.

Second, sheepskin has been seriously devalued. Among many signs of this, the most recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy reveals that the percentage of Americans whose top degree is a bachelor's who were "proficient" readers dropped by about 10 points between 1992 and 2003 - and only about 38 percent were proficient in 1992. Americans with graduate degrees saw similar drops.

But the greatest cost has been, well, college costs. Ever-growing aid has encouraged students to demand more from schools - extravagant recreation centers, gourmet food, luxurious dorms - and enabled schools to rapidly increase charges. It's no coincidence that since 1979, real aid per student - most of it federal - rose 149 percent, while public four-year college charges ballooned 105 percent and private prices 126 percent.

What to do?

The solution is obvious: Get the feds out of education. They do little more than take money from taxpayers, shave off big sums for bureaucratic processing - Mr. Obama is calling for more than \$1.8 billion to run the Education Department - and return the remainder with stultifying regulations attached.

Unfortunately, logic and political reality rarely meet.

The primary political problem is that those whose livelihoods come from government-dominated education are most motivated and best organized to engage in education politics. The Department of Education exacerbates the problem, giving everyone from college lobbyists to teachers unions a Cabinet-level nerve center through which to command ever-more money and protection from accountability.

That said, the other political problem is that many Americans - who are generally too busy with other things to cogitate over why government fails - truly equate federal politicians interfering in education with improving education. But as decades of academic stagnation and belt-busting budgets have proven, that's just not the case.

Federal education meddling, and the department through which most of it is done, must end. Our fiscal and educational futures depend on it.

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