

An Interview with Neal Mc Cluskey: The Right Reasons Why the Teacher Bailout is Wrong

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Neal Mc Cluskey

7.8.10 - Michael F. Shaughnessy - The primary reason taxpayers should oppose the teacher bailout – and we're really talking about a bailout for both teachers and other public-schooling staffers – is that we have increased public-school staffing for decades and gotten no corresponding improvement in achievement.

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- 1) Neal, it seems that every time I turn around, these politicians are putting some kind of strange spin or simply incorrect explanation about things. Why SHOULD the average taxpayer oppose the Teacher Bailout?**

The primary reason taxpayers should oppose the teacher bailout – and we're really talking about a bailout for both teachers and other public-schooling staffers – is that we have increased public-school staffing for decades and gotten no corresponding improvement in achievement. Indeed, over the past forty years public-school staffing has grown ten times faster than enrollment while achievement scores for students at the end of high school have been stagnant. If anything, then, taxpayers should demand more public-school employment cuts so that the saved money could stay with taxpayers who could put it to more productive uses.

- 2) Neal, they have this Race to the Top thing- have any REAL accomplishments been seen or are these politicians just blabbering?**

So far, Race to the Top has been much more hype than hero. Yes, some states have eliminated some atrocious barriers to some common-sense things like being able to evaluate teachers based on student outcomes, but for the most part states have just promised to plan to do good stuff. Very little of any substance has actually been done, and anyone even remotely familiar with public schooling knows that promises and plans come easy – positive results, not so much.

At the very best, all you can objectively say about Race to the Top is that the jury is out until we can measure academic achievement and other outcomes and connect them to RTTT. Unfortunately, to put it mildly, RTTT aficionados aren't restricting themselves to that.

3) If you were in charge of things---where would YOU put the money---if in fact there is any left after the War in Afghanistan and Iraq?

It's not so much where I would put the money as I wouldn't take it from taxpayers in the first place. Individuals know better than government what their needs are, and collectively will meet those needs better if they are able to freely interact with each other. Moreover, even if you thought Washington could somehow attend to individuals' needs better than the individuals themselves you would have to factor in the hugely disproportionate political power of special interests, and all the greed-driven distortions that causes. So even if government were somehow capable of micromanaging our lives better than we could manage them ourselves, you wouldn't want to give it that power because special interests would subvert the process to enrich themselves.

4) Should the government be subsidizing Pell Grants, or should we put the responsibility on the parents and the students themselves?

The government should not be funding Pell Grants, though it is important to note that there are a lot of other federal student aid programs even worse than Pell that should be eliminated first. Pell is at least somewhat targeted to truly low-income students, unlike federal tuition tax credits or taxpayer-subsidized PLUS loans. But the fact of the matter is that no one should get to go to college to increase their own future earnings using free money from taxpayers, which is what Pell Grants are. And it is also clear that government aid to students helps to drive out-of-control tuition inflation and huge college and university inefficiencies. Ultimately, everyone – except some people with rent-seeking ivory tower jobs – would be better off if government student aid were phased out.

5) Illogical, irrational, unreasonable, inappropriate, unrealistic thinking seems to be pervasive in Washington about money and where to spend it. Are the Democrats all just flakey thinkers or is there any logic at all there in D.C.?

This is not ultimately a Democrat or Republican issue – both parties have demonstrated a taxpayer-crippling inability to say no to wasteful education spending and the vote-grubbing that drives it. Sure, the Republicans talk more about fiscal discipline and keeping the federal government within Constitutional limits, but don't forget that the massive federal intrusion known as No Child Left Behind was championed by President George W. Bush and enacted with bipartisan congressional support. Also don't forget that real spending for NCLB

programs rose about 40 percent under Bush. At least with the Democrats you know their default policy will be to throw more money at the public schools.

- 6) Just between you and me, we have this thing called the bell shaped curve. How much do you think Race to the Top is going to help move that Bell Curve over?**

If we're talking about a bell curve of student achievement, I expect Race to the Top won't move it at all. I predict that when all is said and done Race to the Top will have produced lots of promises of reform but little of substance.

- 7) I have been a teacher, so I know that class size is a big issue...doesn't anyone seem to care about stuffing 30, 35, 40 kids into a classroom and the implications?**

I actually don't think increasing class sizes is a big issue, though teacher unions especially have trotted it out to frighten people into supporting the proposed federal teacher bailout. The empirical research on class size does not seem to support the notion that we get even close to the most bang for our education buck by reducing class sizes, and the experience in California – where class-size reduction resulted in huge teacher shortfalls – shows the considerable practical problems with wide-scale class size reduction.