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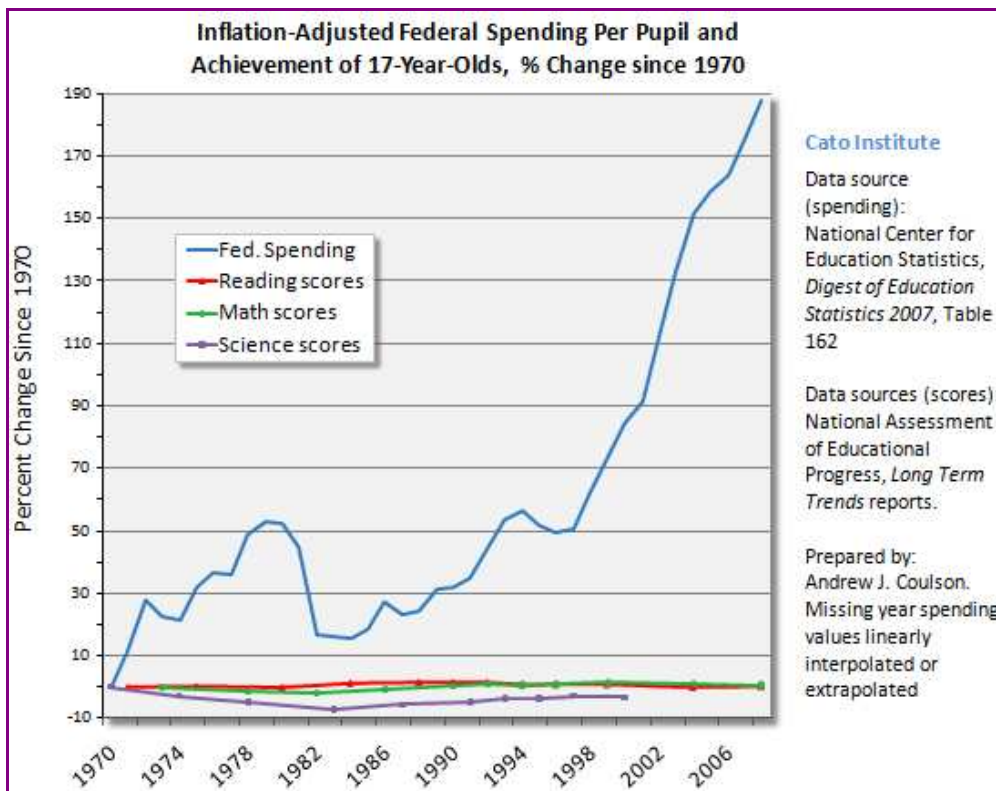
The Ongoing Education Bailout

October 8th, 2009 at 11:59 am by [E. D. Kain](#) | [No Comments](#) |

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Since 1970 federal spending on education per student has skyrocketed. Increasingly, state and local governments are turning to the federal government to balance their budgets and provide needed funds for education.

Jason Kuznicki, a research fellow at the Cato Institute, [discussed](#) the chart below detailing federal spending increases in education and the rather flat results over the past few decades. There has been some backlash over the significance of the numbers. What, after all, has led to these increases in federal spending? Special education, perhaps? And is the data itself simply not comprehensive enough to show whether or not increases in federal spending have had any measurable effect on educational performance?



But the larger story is that during those same years that the federal government has increased its funding for education, state and local governments have become increasingly dependent on the federal government to shore up budgets, step in during a crisis, and keep them solvent. Look no further than the recent stimulus money and the bailout of the states. Many states could barely sustain their commitments to education budgets without federal padding. Is there any reason to think this will change next year? Next recession?

It's not so much that this is a serious problem right now, either. The federal government is responsible for only about [8.3 percent](#) of all public education spending. The problem lies in the future, as state and local governments continue down the path of dependency, relying more and more on the federal government to catch them when they fall, and of course doing whatever it takes to make sure they qualify for the handouts.

While the feds may have a carrot and stick in mind, what actually happens is that local school districts and state governments begin to slack on their fiscal and educational commitments, and instead begin to focus on the administrative task of getting more and more federal money. They don't look for ways to cut wasteful spending, or increase productivity (except in the generic way the feds want them to), because they have the scent of a bailout should things head south. This works in wonkland – the experts up top get to dictate the rules of the game, and the poor saps at Joe Sixpack Elementary do what they're told and create a bunch of eight-year-old geniuses. But in the real world it suffers from the constraints of reality – it becomes a game of standardized tests, unwieldy uniformity, and expensive red tape.

Once you lose your fiscal autonomy, you begin to lose your creative autonomy, too. It doesn't happen quickly or obviously, either. This sort of surrender is to the thief in the night. It's a debtor's surrender.

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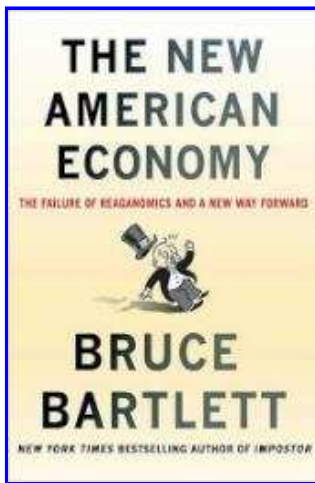
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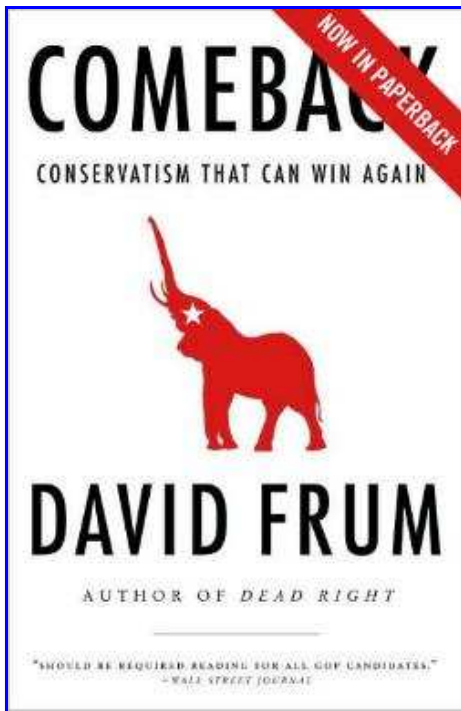


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