

Making America ~~Stronger~~ Weaker

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The F-35 fighter jet is the costliest weapons system in U.S. history, yet it is virtually recession-proof and largely shielded even from the sequester. Production of the jets is spread across so many congressional districts that the F-35 program's budget has been immunized by the legions of representatives ready to go to the mat for it. The program is not simply a "job producer"—it is seen as an investment in the future and our safety, as is educating all our children to high levels. Every congressional district has public schools and students, of course, yet they are bracing for unconscionable cuts as a result of the sequester.

If there is any fat to trim from education budgets after years of deep state and local cutbacks, the sequester isn't intended to target it. The automatic spending cuts don't spare highly effective or urgently needed programs—quite to the contrary. Some of the harshest cuts target programs that are critical for children who are disadvantaged or have special needs. These cuts will hurt—both today and tomorrow.

These actions weren't unavoidable; they were concocted in the halls of Congress. As columnist E.J. Dionne observed, "The GOP has been using serial, self-created crises to gain political leverage."

If some may benefit from this cynical parlor game, who stands to lose?

The 70,000 infants and young children who receive educational, health, nutritional and social services through Head Start programs would lose those services. The 1.2 million students who get targeted assistance through Title I to overcome economic and educational disadvantages would be denied that support. Funding would be lost for tens of thousands of teachers, including more than 7,200 special education teachers and staff who work with students with learning disabilities and emotional and behavioral disorders. As many as 373,000 seriously mentally ill adults and emotionally disturbed children could go untreated.

A teacher at a Philadelphia elementary school recently wrote about what her

students, who already have endured "cut after cut," could lose. In the past year alone, her class has increased from 19 to 27 students, many of whom have special needs and all of whom need one-on-one attention. Their Title I-funded reading intervention program is now at risk—the extra support that is the "difference between a child succeeding and falling further and further behind."

Many elected officials downplayed the impact of the sequester by noting that the sky did not fall on March 1. But the effects are starting to be felt, and the long-term cumulative harm will be devastating, particularly for the kids we should be helping the most.

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Officials who decry the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children too often stand idly by as services for at-risk children are slashed. Politicians who talk about the need for America to be competitive in the global economy operate as if we can cut—rather than invest—our way to competitiveness. And many officials who, in effect, preside over policies that fail to mitigate poverty, and even lead to greater inequality, nevertheless blame teachers for societal problems beyond their control.

These trends make me wonder if there's another agenda at work that connects them: degrade and undermine confidence in public schools; then defund schools, making educational success that much tougher; and then dismantle public schools in favor of alternatives to public education. That's precisely what's happening with alarming frequency through widespread school closures.

Schools targeted for closure generally lack the funds for effective educational programming and the socio-emotional supports children need to close the achievement gap. Closing neighborhood schools further punishes these communities by creating education "deserts," which destabilizes communities instead of seeding conditions for success. Last week, I was arrested with numerous community members for protesting plans to close 23 Philadelphia public schools and demanding that officials fulfill their responsibility to provide all children and all communities with sound neighborhood-based educational options.

The sequester is a man-made crisis that could end tomorrow if we stopped pointing fingers and started living up to our shared responsibility to the children and people we serve. While some programs will withstand the sequester, there are no such assurances for the children and educators who spend their days striving for excellence in America's public schools. Our nation's strength comes from many sources. Ensuring that all children have access to an excellent public education is chief among them, and that is an investment we should secure for our children and our country.



Photo: Lauren Long

Weingarten with prekindergarten students at Delaware Academy School in Syracuse, N.Y.

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