

The New Normal

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We're going to be doing a lot of deficit cutting over the next several years. The country's future greatness will be shaped by whether we cut wisely or stupidly. So we should probably come up with a few sensible principles to guide us as we cut.

The first one, as I tried to argue last week, is: Make Everybody Hurt. The sacrifice should be spread widely and fairly. A second austerity principle is this: Trim from the old to invest in the young. We should adjust pension promises and reduce the amount of money spent on health care during the last months of life so we can preserve programs for those who are growing and learning the most.

So far, this principle is being trampled. Seniors vote. Taxpayers revolt. Public employees occupy capitol buildings to protect their bargaining power for future benefits negotiations. As a result, seniors are being protected while children are getting pummeled. If you look across the country, you see education financing getting sliced — often in the most thoughtless and destructive ways. The future has no union.

In Washington, the Republicans who designed the cuts for this fiscal year seemed to have done no serious policy evaluation. They excused the elderly and directed cuts at anything else they could easily reach. Under their budget, financing for early-childhood programs would fall off a cliff. Tens of thousands of kids, maybe hundreds of thousands, would have their slots eliminated midyear.

Out in the states, the situation is scarcely better. Many governors of both parties are diverting money from schools in thoughtless and self-destructive ways. Hawaii decided to cut the number of days in the school year. Of all the ways to cut education, why on earth would you reduce student time in the classroom?

Texas is taking the meat cleaver approach. School financing will be cut by at least 13.5 percent, around \$3.5 billion. About 85,000 new students arrive in Texas every year. There will be no additional resources to accommodate them.

Which leads to the third austerity principle: Never cut without an evaluation process. Before legislators and governors chop a section of the budget, they should make a list of all the relevant programs. They should grade each option and then start paying for them from the top down.

It seems simple, but that is not what is happening. Instead, legislators and administrators are simply cutting on the basis of what's politically easy and what vaguely seems expendable. In education, many administrators are quick to cut athletics, band, cheerleading, art and music because they have the vague impression that those are luxuries. In fact, they are exactly the programs that keep kids in school and build character.

I have a lot of problems with President Obama's tepid budget. But it does an excellent job of linking funds to outcomes, especially in education.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan gave a superb speech in November called the New Normal. He observed that this era of austerity should be an occasion to increase productivity and cut the things that are ineffective. Duncan is a fountain of ideas to make more with less.

For example, he says, if we have to increase class sizes, we should put more kids in with the best teachers and then we should pay those teachers more to compensate for the extra load. Most of us parents would rather see our kids in a class of 30 with a great teacher than a class of 25 with an average one.

The president's budget increases spending on things like early education, and it is also stuffed with mechanisms to make programs perform better. When I spoke with the mavens that put the budget together, I found that they had a clear and skeptical view of whether many of these programs work. They perfectly described the studies measuring the strengths and weaknesses of each program.

They know that Head Start, for example, is a hodgepodge. Some facilities are great. Many are terrible. The administration would evaluate each program. The bottom 25 percent would have to compete to keep their financing. Those that didn't improve would get replaced.

Similarly, Pell grant levels have surged in recent decades, but college completion rates have been flat. The administration would reform the Pell grant program, eliminating parts that don't work. More important, it would establish stronger incentives so colleges have an interest in getting kids to graduate, not simply attend.

During the fat years, nobody bothered to link pay to performance. Government workers and government programs got funding increases no matter how they did. This model is anathema to most Americans, especially those under 40.

This period of austerity will be a blessing if it spurs an effectiveness revolution. It will be a disaster if the cutting is done politically or mindlessly. Unfortunately, that's often how it is being done now.

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