

Robbing Peter to Pay Paul: The case against “comparability”

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Two proposals in the bill currently circulating to reauthorize No Child Left Behind seem to be shoe-ins for making their way into federal law. The impetus behind both proposals is to help poor kids by making sure that districts spend as much money on them as gets spent rich kids.

A no brainer, right?

That’s certainly the conclusion made by the *New York Times* in a September 7 editorial, (http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/07/opinion/07fri1.html?_r=1&hp&oref=slogin) heartily endorsing two provisions in Rep. George Miller’s revisions to the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act. Together with his Republican colleague Buck McKeon, Miller has included in his House bill stricter requirements on districts’ eligibility for federal funds, first ramping up “comparability,” which has to do with funding schools get from their districts and, second, a get-tough approach to a notion introduced in the original NCLB known as the “equitable distribution of teachers.”

But both of these seemingly good ideas are deeply flawed as presented in the Miller bill. First, on the new comparability requirements.

Comparability means school districts shouldn’t use money they get from the

Federal government for disadvantaged kids, known as Title I money, just to level the playing field with more affluent schools and districts. The purpose of that money is explicitly to provide extra funding for poor children, because it takes more money to educate children coming from poverty.

That is what the law has always required, and on paper, that’s exactly what school districts have always done. But a couple of studies came out a few years ago showing that the way districts report their budget figures masks what’s really going on, concluding that school districts are routinely violating Title I rules.

One major source of the district violations is the way districts build their individual school budgets. When school districts allocate teachers to schools, they generally don’t attach a dollar figure to the cost of teachers. They award their schools a certain number of teachers without spelling out how much each teacher costs. When it comes time to report to the state how much money each of its schools receives, the district uses its average teacher salary to represent the cost of each teacher, no matter how much each specific teacher might actually cost.

The impact of this practice on schools can mean some sizeable differences in



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the actual dollars that go to schools. For example, one school that gets assigned 30 teachers may have an actual annual payroll of \$2 million and another school also with 30 teachers may have an actual annual payroll of \$2.1 million. In reality, the district spends \$100,000 more per year on the second school than the first.

Whereas districts have always sort of assumed that these kinds of spending disparities didn't have any real significance, others disagree. It turns out that schools with higher numbers of poor children tend to employ teachers who cost less. The more senior teachers gravitate to the more affluent schools. When they gain enough seniority, they get first dibs on plum assignments in less challenging schools. And this is what has Congress up in arms.

Congress wants to make sure districts spend the same amount of money on their poor schools as on their more affluent schools. It feels justified doing so, because it is accusing districts of using Title I money somehow inappropriately to mask the inequitable allocation of district funds.

Congress is right that poor kids should at minimum get the same quality of teacher as more affluent kids. In fact, we would argue they should get the best teachers. But Congress and others aren't paying any attention to the fact that there is almost no correlation between the money a district pays a teacher and the value that the district gets. Study after study has shown conclusively that, after the first year of teaching, teacher experience has little impact on teacher effectiveness. Teachers are about as effective in their third year as they will be in their 20th year.

So a school district may be paying \$75,000 a year to Mrs. Smith, a 20 year veteran, and only \$38,000 to Ms. Jones, a young energetic teacher, even though Ms. Jones is the real prize. It's a notion that anyone in the workplace can understand—it's not necessarily the case that those who have

been there the longest are more valuable—but it is especially true in teaching which requires so much daily mental and physical energy.

Given the anachronistic way we pay teachers—almost entirely on the basis of years served—how much they earn bears no connection to their value. Congressional assumption that a dollar spent gives back a dollar's value is a fundamentally flawed economic assumption that, if played out as Congress intends, is going to wreak havoc on schools. *Experience is not just a poor proxy for effectiveness; it is a false proxy.*

Congress, if the House has its way, is about to tell schools that they have to equalize teacher salaries between their poorest and most affluent schools. In many low-performing districts, this means equalizing poor schools and even poorer schools.

In reality, school districts will have only three choices to meet this requirement: (1) raise the salaries of the lower-priced teachers in the poorer schools—which leaves the same teachers in place and makes this provision pointless; (2) lower the salaries of the higher-priced teachers in the more affluent schools—which is laughably impossible; or (3) the only real option—move higher paid teachers to the poorer schools.

Equalizing resources means that districts will have to go into schools and make staffing decisions that have nothing to do with teacher performance or results. They'll have to make decisions based on teacher seniority. Districts decry the influence seniority has now on how schools are run—dictated by union contracts and transfer rights. Imagine the implications of a decree from Congress that all teachers in the school effectively have to have the same average number of years of experience. And with all the accountability talk about giving principals more authority over what goes on in their building, here's the US government taking it away.

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I see the following scenario as unavoidable. A go-getter principal has been charged with turning around a struggling school. The principal has hired a lot of young, energetic staff and is starting to make real progress. She has worked hard to get the tired, obstinate veterans out of the building. Along comes the district superintendent, (with orders from the state on orders from the Feds) who informs the principal that her payroll is too low, that they have to transfer two expensive—but utterly ineffective—teachers from another school. Out go two great young teachers and in comes more dead wood.

How is this good for poor children?

Advocates for comparability have yet to come up with an alternative scenario that makes this unhappy scenario less likely to happen. As other proposals put out by policy groups have called for, the Miller bill does include a restriction that prevents districts from equalizing funding by forcing staffing changes on their schools.

But districts will have no other choice. Are we really to believe districts would risk losing their federal funding in the far from unimaginable event that Mrs. Smith, the twenty year veteran, just won't agree to transfer to a poor school, no matter the incentives the district offers? Put simply, transferring staff—voluntarily or otherwise—for reasons that have nothing to do with student achievement is what districts will be forced into doing, and the technical prohibition will be all but meaningless, because no one will be able to prove why a teacher gets transferred. Let's reiterate: all of these staffing decisions were made to meet a federal law without regard for what is good for the children in that building.

Then there's the second troubling part of this bill: "equitable distribution."

This provision too is a response to research showing that more affluent schools have higher percentages of qualified teachers.

It too is grounded in the commendable goal shared by all of us that poor children deserve *at least* the same quality of teachers as more affluent children. The proposal includes some welcome language that implies Congress intends to get tough with states about addressing the distribution of highly qualified teachers among high-poverty and more affluent school districts. But the bill also appears to require that teachers earning the highly qualified teacher designation have to be equitably distributed among the schools in a particular district.

Here too Congress shows remarkably little knowledge of how schools work. It just sounds good—better teachers for poor kids--and that's enough for Congress.

The provision is based on several mistaken assumptions, the first being that school districts generally have a relatively equal numbers of both poor and affluent schools. And certainly such districts exist. Florida, for example, has county-based school districts which contain many schools serving poor children and many schools serving affluent children. Such districts have little excuse for not coming up with ways to make sure that their poorer schools get their share of highly qualified teachers.

But most school districts are not so proportionate. The school districts that serve the poorest children in the country are predominantly serving almost all poor children. Many of these districts are what we call "doughnut districts." They're like Baltimore City with a poverty rate of 73% surrounded by more affluent Baltimore County with a poverty rate of 31%. Or Atlanta with a poverty rate of 76% surrounded by Fulton County with a poverty rate of 38%.

Congress isn't saying let's take some of the highly qualified teachers from the more affluent districts that surround these cities and reassign them to the city—from their

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perspective, that would be trampling on local control. They're saying that districts should weaken the already fragile structure that sustains the small number of schools within a single district that middle class families are still willing to attend.

Look closer at these struggling districts. They may have only a handful of schools that have managed to stay attractive to middle class families. And if the staffing of these schools is suddenly turned upside down to comply with both the comparability and equitable distribution requirements, what is the likelihood that these families will remain?

It doesn't take a historian or a sociologist to recognize the harm that the loss of the middle class in urban school districts has inflicted on the education of poor children. It's been disastrous for poor families, who became further isolated and less able to uphold the quality and standards that sustain a well functioning school system. In the end it is not the exiting families that suffer but the very children we most seek to help.

But even ignoring the middle class argument, which is not who we are focusing on here anyway; it still isn't clear how the "equitable distribution" of teachers within a district is going to help poor kids. You'd be pulling a teacher who works in a school with a 60% poverty rate and placing her in a school with a 90% poverty rate. Poor is poor and doing the teacher shuffle isn't going to stack up in kids favor.

In Baltimore 96% of the city's elementary schools have at least a 50% poverty rate. Only 5 schools in the city fall below this number. And not one single elementary school could possibly be considered affluent. Even in the "wealthiest" elementary school in the city, one third of the students are living in poverty.

Philadelphia, St. Louis and Detroit all offer a similar picture. Take a look at any urban

district in this country and you will find the same tale. We have to ask, does a child in a school with a 50% poverty rate really look that much different than a child in a school with a 70% poverty rate?

Congressional intent with these proposals is undoubtedly well meaning. But in the case of both equitable distribution and comparability of teacher salaries, they are good ideas on the surface, but they are not based on full knowledge of either how districts work or the struggles they face. And they would almost certainly have unintended consequences going beyond negative to disastrous.

But that is not to say that teacher quality is not an issue for high poverty and low performing schools. It most certainly is. And refreshingly, the Miller bill also includes some very good provisions for addressing this, such as premium pay to attract teachers to high needs schools and subject areas; better mentoring and induction for new teachers; performance pay; and longitudinal data systems that will allow tracking of teacher effectiveness, to name just a few.

These are the proposals that Congress should authorize and enact, not provisions that rob Peter to pay Paul.