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**Robbing Peter to Pay Paul
How No Child Left Behind May End up Hurting Poor Kids.**

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Two proposals in a House bill 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 their schools as schools serving more affluent children.

A no brainer, right? That's what the *New York Times* seems to think, when it endorsed these two proposals in a September 7 editorial.

The first proposal would strengthen existing rules for what school districts must do to prove that they're using federal dollars only for providing extra services to poor children—and *not* using them to pay for regular operating costs that are the responsibility of districts.

This get-tough move by Congress can be attributed to recent evidence showing that more affluent schools are getting more money than the poorer schools within the same district. Because teachers with more seniority tend to gravitate to more affluent schools, schools serving poor children have less senior teachers and therefore, lower payrolls. Congress wants to put a stop to this practice by requiring all schools in the district to have comparable payrolls.

Congress is right that poor kids should at minimum get the same quality of teacher as more affluent kids. In fact, I would argue they should get the best teachers.

But assuming that higher payrolls buy a better quality of teacher is flat out wrong. *Experience is not just a poor proxy for effectiveness; it is a false proxy.* 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 appreciate, 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 could wreak havoc on schools.

What is likely to happen if this bill makes it into law? Most obviously, staffing decisions will get made in order to comply with federal requirements that have nothing to do with what is in the best interest of children.

For example, it is easy to imagine a situation involving some go-getter principal who has hired a lot of young, energetic staff and is starting to make real progress. Along comes the district superintendent (with orders from the state on orders from the Feds), who informs the principal that because her payroll is too low, they have to transfer in 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?

Then there's another troubling proposal from the bipartisan House bill: "equitable distribution" of qualified teachers.

This provision too is a response to research showing that more affluent schools have higher percentages of qualified teachers. The bill appears to require that teachers earning the "highly qualified teacher" designation have to be equitably distributed among the schools in a particular district. On the surface, it makes all the sense in the world, but played out in the way that districts operate, it's a disaster in the making.

First, this provision assumes that school districts generally have a relatively equal numbers of both poor and affluent schools. And certainly such districts exist. Large districts such as Florida's county-based 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. In fact, the school districts that serve the poorest children in the country serve predominantly almost all poor children. Many of these districts are "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 perspective, that would be trampling on local control. No, with all the best intentions, they are going after the handful of schools in these districts that are still able to attract middle class families.

Look closer at these struggling districts. 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.

If the staffing of these schools is suddenly turned upside down to comply with both the comparability and equitable distribution requirements—nonsensical, illogical moves that will create anger and bitterness--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 middle class families that suffer but the very children we most seek to help.

But put aside this argument, it still isn't clear how the “equitable distribution” of teachers within a district is going to help poor kids. More often than not, it is likely to be the teacher who works in a school with a 60% poverty rate who must be moved to work 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.

Teacher quality is perhaps the greatest challenge facing these struggling school districts. The House bill does in fact include some good provisions for addressing these challenges, 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.