

## The Looming Threat of Sequestration

by John Mitchell, CEAI DC Area Director

As you prepare to go back to school later this month you may hear rumors of cuts to Federal education funding through a process called sequestration. Remember last August when Congress could not make up its collective mind on how to provide a balanced budget for our nation? What you may not remember is that as part of the torturous process of agreeing to once again raise the debt limit they also agreed to form a “super committee” of 6 Democrats and 6 Republicans with power to recommend cuts in the Federal budget. They placed a sword of impending doom over the committee by also passing a “sequestration” requirement that if they could come to an agreement, over a trillion dollars in automatic cuts would kick in beginning January 2, 2013. The cuts would impact both defense spending and domestic programs. Even with this impending threat the committee empowered to recommend cuts could not agree to a recommendation to bring before congress so there is the potential that if congress does not act before the end of the calendar year the automatic cuts will kick in.

How bad could the cuts be? Many education advocacy organizations have sent out dire warnings about the possibility of cuts. And because the Federal education budget is so large the education cuts are big numbers. The Committee on Education Funding under the headline “STOP THE LARGEST EDUCATION FUNDING CUTS EVER!!” provided an [analysis](#) in February projecting the possibility of 9.6% cuts or a total of \$4.1 billion in Federal education expenditures. Last week President Obama’s Education Secretary Arne Duncan in Congressional testimony also spoke in extreme terms about the cuts, “The sequestration will put at risk all that we’ve accomplished in education and weaken programs that help children, serve families, send young people and adults to college and make the middle class American dream possible.” This language makes it sound like we will not have any public education left in the country if the cuts go through.

It is curious that on the day before Secretary Duncan made his comments to congress the Deputy Secretary of Education, Anthony W. Miller, sent a memorandum to every state’s Chief State School Officer urging them not to panic and overreact to the threat of sequestration. Among other things the memo said:

*“It has come to our attention that some States may have urged school districts to hold back on spending for the 2012-13 school year because of the possibility of sequestration. Assuming Congress enacts a 2013 appropriations bill that is structured similarly to the pending House or Senate bills—a reasonable assumption based on past practice—there is no reason to believe that a sequestration would affect funding for the 2012-13 school year.”*

So if you hear alarmist rumors of impending cuts in education funding, rest easy and know that if there are cuts caused by sequestration, they are likely to not have much impact until the 2014 school year. Further, a quick, back of the envelope calculation can give us a realistic assessment of the potential scale of the education cuts. The Federal Government only provides about 8% of the total public school education budget, so taking the Committee on Education Funding’s projection that federal support of

education would be cut by 9.6%; the total impact would be less than 1% (actually .77%) of school district budgets. Of course particular programs like IDEA and Title I that are more heavily funded by the Federal Government are likely to be disproportionately impacted, but overall the impact would just not be that great.

Why is there all of the hoopla about sequestration? Clearly some would like educators to become fearful or angry about the cuts in order to motivate them to become grassroots lobbyists for solving the sequestration issue and the larger issue of the federal deficit without impacting education. This is also likely to be used as a wedge issue in the Presidential election. The real issue behind sequestration is the Federal deficit. Is it realistic or even appropriate to think that our country can solve our massive debt issues without some impact on education?

Christian educators should be the last group to allow our sentiments to be swayed by fear. We have been told that, "God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control." (2 Timothy 1:7), and throughout scripture we are encouraged to only fear God and not man. Of course many Christians may choose to take political action against education cuts not out of fear, but rather out of a sincere belief that education funding needs to be preserved as an important priority for the future of the nation. But when organizations or individuals attempt to manipulate us and influence our votes through playing on fears of budget or job cuts we should be suspect of both their motives and their message.

If you have thoughts or comments on this issue or other Federal education issues please share them with us. You can address your thoughts and comments to [JMitchell@ceai.org](mailto:JMitchell@ceai.org).

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