AMERICA'S DILEMMA: TEACHERS OR FOOD

Remember that important NYT story from early this year describing the growing number of Americans whose sole income consists of food stamps?

> About six million Americans receiving food stamps report they have no other income, according to an analysis of state data collected by The New York Times. In declarations that states verify and the federal government audits, they described themselves as unemployed and receiving no cash aid — no welfare, no unemployment insurance, and no pensions, child support or disability pay.
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> Their numbers were rising before the recession as tougher welfare laws made it harder for poor people to get cash aid, but they have soared by about 50 percent over the past two years. About one in 50 Americans now lives in a household with a reported income that consists of nothing but a food-stamp card.

Well, months after that report came out, some genius in the Obama Administration, according to a very shrill David Obey, proposed offsetting funds to keep teachers in the schools by cutting food stamps. Said genius wanted to cut these people's only safety net so Arne Duncan could go on privatizing our schools.

> **The secretary of Education is whining about the fact he only got 85 percent of the money he wanted** .… So, when we needed money, we committed the cardinal sin of treating him like any other mere mortal. We were giving them over $10 billion in money to help keep teachers on the job, plus another $5 billion for

> Pell, so he was getting $15 billion for the programs he says he cares about, and it was costing him $500 million [in reductions to the Race to the Top program]. Now that's a pretty damn good deal.
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> So as far as I'm concerned, the secretary of Education should have been happy as hell. He should have taken that deal and smiled like a Cheshire cat. He's got more walking around money than every other cabinet secretary put together.
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> It blows my mind that the White House would even notice the fight [over Race to the Top]. I would have expected the president to say to the secretary, "look, you're getting a good deal, for God's sake, what this really does is guarantee that the rest of the money isn't going to be touched."
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> We gave [Duncan] $4.3 billion in the stimulus package, no questions asked. He could spend it any way he wants. … I trusted the secretary, so I gave him a hell of a lot more money than I should have.
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> My point is that I have been working for school reform long before I ever heard of the secretary of education, and long before I ever heard of Obama. And I'm happy to welcome them on the reform road, but I'll be damned if I think the only road to reform lies in the head of the Secretary of Education.
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> We were told we have to offset every damn dime of [new teacher spending]. Well, it ain't easy to find offsets, and with all due respect to the administration **their first suggestion for offsets was to cut food stamps**. Now they were careful not to make an official budget request, because they

> didn't want to take the political heat for it, but that was the first trial balloon they sent down here. … Their line of argument was, well, the cost of food relative to what we thought it would be has come down, so people on food stamps are getting a pretty good deal in comparison to what we thought they were going to get. Well isn't that nice. Some poor bastard is going to get a break for a change. [emphasis original]

As a reminder, here's David Dayen's summary of the squabble between Obey and Duncan.

> One of [the amendments in the war spending resolution] included this social spending money, comprised of:
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> > $10 billion for an Education Jobs Fund, $4.95 billion for Pell Grants, $701 million for border security, $180 million for innovative technology energy loans, $163 million for schools on military installations, $142 million in additional Gulf Coast oil spill funding, $50 million in emergency food assistance, and $16.5 million to build a new soldier processing center at Fort Hood.
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> You can read the full summary from David Obey of the Appropriations Committee here. There were some underlying provisions from the Senate war supplemental that appropriated funds to disaster relief, victims of Agent Orange, mine safety, the oil spill, and other areas.
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> This money in this amendment is entirely paid for through rescissions in various programs, and actually reduces the

> deficit by $439 million. But in order to pay for the education jobs fund and save 140,000 teachers, House appropriators dipped into $500 million of the Race to the Top fund. Arne Duncan has been sitting on $4 billion dollars in stimulus money for over a year so he can bribe states into changing their education policies. In the meantime, state budgets are in absolute crisis and hundreds of thousands of teachers could lose their jobs. The deficit scolds want things paid for, so House appropriators proposed taking just a sliver of that $4 billion Duncan is hoarding, to apply to the education jobs fund. The most important possible "reform" right now for public schools is for them to have teachers. If you're going to use "unspent stimulus money," Race to the Top is a good place to start.
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> But this doesn't meet with Duncan's cunning plan, so the White House threatened a veto of the bill if that amendment passed. In their statement of Administration policy, they wrote:
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> > H.R. 4899 also contains $800 million in rescissions from education reform programs—programs that will help schools upgrade their standards and instruction so as to better prepare more students to succeed in school and in life. The Administration is more than willing to work with the Congress to pursue fiscally responsible ways to finance education jobs; however, these rescissions undercut programs that have already received applications from more than three dozen States. It would be short-sighted to weaken funding for these reforms just as they

> > begin to show such promise. The Administration urges the House to include education jobs funding in a version of H.R. 4899 that does not rescind education reform funding. If the final bill presented to the President includes cuts to education reforms, the President's senior advisors would recommend a veto.
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> What they actually wanted was the same bill the Senate passed so they could easily get their precious war money. And they wanted the maximum amount of shock-doctrine funds to force untested "reforms" on public schools nationwide.

That sort of gives you a good idea of why David Obey is so shrill. (Make sure to read DDay's update if you haven't already.)

But take one more step back to put this fiscal choice in larger perspective. This squabble broke out over the war supplemental. Which means we were, as a country, really considering cutting the food allowance to those suffering in this recession in order to keep some teachers on the job, all while we appropriate $33 billion to fight around 350 al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan.