

Timely Commentary

Will Congress learn its budget lessons?

By **Dennis Van Roekel**

Will Congress ever get its act together?

That question is likely on the minds of many Americans, but the latest impasse should actually serve as a reminder that we need to redouble our efforts to make sure Congress focuses on the right priorities and moves the country forward. As a former educator, I do not believe in giving up on anyone, even a Congress that always seems to be at loggerheads. Here are a few key budget lessons that Congress should heed.

The first lesson is that our nation can't grow if we don't invest in its people. The mindless, across-the-board budget cuts known as 'the sequester' have already hurt our children. And it's only going to get worse — no band-aid solutions will heal this wound.

More than half the districts recently surveyed by the national school superintendents' association reported they will be reducing the number of staff in our schools in order to pay for these needless cuts. Of course, it's our children who really miss out — nearly half of the districts will be increasing class size.

Early childhood programs; drop-out prevention programs; programs that help children with special needs — the very investments our schools require — have instead been slashed. Any parent or teacher knows you can't get that time back again — there's no do-over for children who miss out on a good head start.

The second lesson is that spending cuts are the direct result of big corporations and wealthy individuals dodging their fair share of taxes. In this fall's budget debate, we have a stark choice: do we continue to squeeze ordinary Americans until they can no longer breathe, or do we invest in America again, demanding that corporations and their CEO's contribute to America's prosperity and start living

by the same rules as the rest of us?

The trade-offs can be startlingly clear. The sequester cuts to elementary and secondary education — which hit low-income kids and those with special learning challenges particularly hard — cost \$1.7 billion this year. That's the same value of the tax break we gave to hedge fund managers that allowed them to cut their tax rate in half. How does that help America grow?

Another example: Head Start, the successful preschool program that gets low-income kids healthy and ready to learn, has dropped 57,000 children this year because of the sequester. Restoring those slots would cost \$400 million, nearly all of which (\$370 million) could be raised by ending the special tax treatment enjoyed by the owners of private jets.

It's a simple matter of priorities.

By pushing for deep cuts, and causing uncertainty and frustration in schools, the unmistakable legacy of some members of Congress will be that they chose cuts over jobs, politics over compromise and the status quo over investment and future innovation.

Thankfully, some members of Congress are already paying attention. Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.) has introduced the Stop Tax Haven Abuse Act, which would close many of the gaping loopholes that allow corporations to dodge taxes by hiding profits and shipping jobs overseas. It would raise \$220 billion over 10 years to replace sequester cuts, curb the offshoring of jobs, and level the playing field for small business trying to compete with big corporations. Passing this legislation would help make unnecessary further disastrous cuts to education.

Federal budget battles have raged for three years now. As a math teacher, I'd like to see Congress prove its basic math proficiency. It's time to acknowledge that ordinary Americans can't be squeezed



any further. America does better when we all do better — we need to protect middle-class priorities and close loopholes and special tax breaks for the wealthy so our nation can make a strong recovery.

(Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association, represents 3 million public school employees. Reprinted with permission of American Forum).