"Teacher Employment" Bill Headed for Senate Vote

Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) told Congressional Quarterly May 4 that a Senate floor vote on his Keep Our Educators Working Act of 2010, S. 3206, is likely in the coming weeks. The bill is designed to prevent layoffs of municipal school teachers whose jobs are threatened by reduced local property tax revenues by appropriating $23 billion in federal funds during fiscal 2010 to the states for local educational assistance.

If passed, all the funds in the bill must be spent within six months. That would add the entire $23 billion to the national deficit, as the bill has no offsetting spending cuts or tax increases.

But out-of-control federal budget deficits are small matters compared with some unionized public school teachers losing their positions, Harkin said: "Make no mistake: this is a crisis of the first order. Not since the Great Depression have our public schools faced the prospect of such massive layoffs. Job losses of this magnitude would take a terrible toll on our education system, resulting in bigger class sizes, fewer program offerings and less time for students to learn in school. This would be a major setback for the nation's economic recovery — both in the immediate future and in terms of our nation's ability to compete in the economy of the 21st Century."

It is true that the recession will mean that public schools will have to enact some cuts after the exaggerated spending increases many schools enacted during the Bush era (not to mention the increases in federal education spending during that same time period). The recession shrunk the size of the economy, and virtually every aspect of the national economy has undergone financial cuts, from finance to business to family budgets. But thus far, the necessary spending cuts, which have already taken place in every other area of the economy, have been postponed in the government schools because of federal "stimulus" spending. The federal "stimulus" bill has truly offered what the *New York Times* a "flood of aid to education," $150 billion in state aid for education over two years. According to the General Accountability Office (GAO), about $19.5 billion had already been spent on filling state educational coffers from the "stimulus" bill this fiscal year alone.

But that federal aid under the "stimulus" bill will slow to a trickle at the end of this fiscal year. Harkin's bill would provide yet another federal budget-busting outlay for states and localities looking toward their fiscal 2011 budgets. Harkin was quick to write on his Senate website that the state teacher's union had endorsed the bill. "This bill would create an Education Jobs Fund that states can use for retaining or hiring employees at the pre-K and K-12 levels, and also at public institutions of higher education. Dozens of groups across the country — from teachers' unions to school boards to colleges and universities — have endorsed my bill. And I am very pleased that President Obama supports this investment as well."

S. 3206 has 25 Democratic cosponsors and the big advantage it has going into the Senate vote is that the bill is a one-issue bill. "It's one straight shot on education, and there is a better chance of passing it that way because it's tightly focused," Harkin told *Congressional Quarterly*. The much bigger $75 billion companion bill in the House, H.R. 4812, includes provisions for jobs for police, firefighters and municipal employment training programs as well as for teachers.

As The John Birch Society explained in a press release opposing the twin pieces of legislation, "While many Americans are losing their jobs, having their wages frozen, or seeing their wages or salaries cut back along with all sorts of benefits, this newest scheme would keep the unionized government employees in the pink. Private sector workers will once again bailout the fat cats in the public sector and in the community organizations that have no constitutional right to taxpayer money."