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OPINION

Turning Progress in the War on Poverty Backwards

'The budget is not fair, Mr. Chair'

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

"The budget is not fair, Mr. Chair." That's part of what I said when I had the opportunity to testify at the House Budget Committee Hearing, "A Progress Report on the War on Poverty: Lessons from the Frontlines."

The budget proposal by House Budget Chair Paul Ryan and passed last month by the House of Representatives would turn progress in the war on poverty backwards by cutting critical funding to safety net programs that help millions of poor children and families while giving tax breaks to the wealthiest and most powerful among us.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities at least 69 percent of the Ryan budget cuts to non-defense programs over the next decade would come from programs that serve low-income children, families, and individuals including Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly food stamps), school lunches and other child nutrition programs, Pell Grants, the Earned Income Tax Credit, the low-income portion of the Child Tax Credit, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) that helps children with very serious disabilities.

At the same time the Ryan budget slashes programs for children and the poor, Citizens for Tax Justice estimates it would give million-

aires an average tax cut of at least \$200,000 by lowering the top personal income tax rate from 39.6 to 25 percent, repealing the Alternative Minimum Tax, and reducing the corporate income tax rate from 35 to 25 percent, as well as other tax breaks.

The Ryan budget is not the only unjust decision Members of Congress have made. On April 29, the House Ways and Means Committee approved without any offsets a permanent extension of six corporate tax breaks that would drain the treasury of \$310 billion over 10 years. That same committee in the very same meeting dropped a provision in the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Improving Opportunities for Youth in Foster Care bill because of its cost.

This tiny, positive provision that would have ensured foster youth had documents like Social Security cards, birth certificates, and health insurance cards to help them make it on their own when they aged out of foster care would have added \$12 million to the 10-year cost of the bill—four thousandths of a percent of the cost to taxpayers of those huge non-offset corporate tax break extenders.

Some of the same lawmakers who routinely support massive corporate tax breaks are among those currently opposing proposals to invest \$90 billion in early childhood

programs over 10 years as too expensive and refusing to pass an extension without an offset of long-term unemployment benefits that would cost \$10 billion. And the Senate voted against opening debate on a Democratic bill to raise the minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour that would move 900,000 people out of poverty, cost the federal government not one cent and in fact could save federal and state governments money by reducing the need for nutrition and other safety net supports.

I don't know what religious texts Members of Congress read, but when I look at the prophets and gospels and the teachings of every major faith I learn that not caring for the poor, the sick, the lame and the orphan is wrong. Acting as Robin Hood in reverse and taking from the poor and needy to give to the wealthy and powerful is even worse. America's dream and promise of a level playing field has become a nightmare for millions of poor children and families struggling to get a foothold in our \$17 trillion economy.

The way to end poverty is not to cut the very programs that are making the difference between a child eating and a child going hungry. Nothing in my decades of work for poor children makes me believe that cutting vital lifelines for millions of families who have fallen on hard times because of economic downturn is the way to create well-paying jobs or help parents have the time and resources to be able to nurture

and support their children.

Nothing in my experience makes me believe that putting college further out of reach for low-income students will help them compete for well-paying jobs. Nothing in my experience makes me believe that the current Ryan budget proposal will help create the economic opportunity and support systems every American needs when hard times hit. And nothing in my experience will ever make me believe that snatching food and shelter and early childhood and education lifelines from children and hard-working poor families to further enrich those who already have far more than their fair share of government help is economically and morally defensible.

What kind of leaders believe we can afford massive tax breaks for the richest one percent but cannot afford to meet the survival needs of all our poor children?

We don't have poverty in our midst because we have done too much for people. We have poverty because we have done too little and have not been fair to all our people, especially our children. We should be fixing the policies that have fueled inequality and given birth to an economy that has stopped working for the majority of hard-working people in our country.

Congress and all of us should be striving to ensure there is a job with a living wage for every working-age person in this country, that every single child, regardless of his or her parents' income or skin color or coun-

try of origin, has access to nurturing and enriching early childhood programs and effective schools, that no families have to choose between paying the electricity bill or buying medicine for their sick child, or have to figure out how to make the last \$20 in food assistance stretch till the end of the month.

It is profoundly unjust and immoral to pretend to be trying to reduce poverty for those struggling to survive—including 16 million children—and cutting the very programs enabling them to survive in a hostile economy, cutting the very programs that help ensure the next generation's adults won't be scarred by a childhood of deprivation.

In his last Sunday sermon at Washington's National Cathedral, calling for a Poor People's Campaign, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. retold the parable of the rich man Dives and the poor and sick man Lazarus who came every day seeking crumbs from Dives' table.

Dives went to hell, Dr. King said, not because he was rich but because he did not realize his wealth was his opportunity to bridge the gulf separating him from his brother and allowed Lazarus to become invisible. He warned this could happen in rich America, "if we don't use her vast resources to end poverty and make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life."

I hope we will heed Dr. King's warning before it's too late.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

Reversing Course on Integrating Public Schools

Brown's
bittersweet Legacy

BY EMILY SCHWARTZ GRECO

What a bittersweet 60th anniversary: On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling declared "separate but equal" school systems inherently unconstitutional.

After making great progress toward integrating public schools, our nation reversed course. Resegregation gradually replaced integration as a leading educational indicator over the past 25 years.

In fact, public schools are more segregated today than they've been since 1968, says Gary Orfield a UCLA professor and the Civil Rights Project's co-director.

It's not just the South. New York State is the nation's worst offender in terms of African-American segregation, followed by Illinois and Michigan. Latino segregation, which the

federal government only began tracking in 1968, "has steadily deteriorated ever since," Orfield explained in an interview.



"I feel kind of heartsick" about the Brown ruling's anniversary, he said, noting that Latino segregation is worse in California than anywhere else.

The resegregation of American public schools may come as a shock to anyone familiar with the increasing diversity of American children. As of 2012, just over half of our kids under five were people of color for the first time since English colonists decimated the Native American population. Back in 1970, nearly four out of five public school pupils were white.

Meanwhile, Kansas is planting the seeds of another potential solution. In March, its Supreme Court ordered the state's lawmakers to make school funding more equitable and stop short-changing the education of poor children.

Thanks to the case's circum-

stances, Kansas can't ask the federal Supreme Court to overturn this ruling. Otherwise, the conservative majority might further sully the legacy of the 1954 ruling, named for Oliver L. Brown, one of the 13 parents of 20 African-American children who joined a class action lawsuit because they wished to enroll their kids in Topeka's whites-only elementary schools.

But don't hold your breath waiting for a breakthrough to ripple across the nation. First, the Supreme Court's conservative majority just endorsed Michigan's ban on affirmative action.

Second, educational inequality gets way less attention than our collective anxiety that American kids don't learn enough.

Whether the crusade of the moment is "No Child Left Behind," "Race to the Top," or forcing teachers to embrace the Common Core, school systems are frantically measuring progress with tests of all kinds. This unquenchable thirst for data inter-

feres with actual learning by making students spend endless hours getting ready to take tests.

Here's one thing that most education experts agree would actually help improve the prospects of at-risk students: making quality preschool education available to them. President Barack Obama is on it, urging Congress to allocate \$75 billion in federal funding over a decade to cover the cost of providing free top-notch preschool to all children whose families earn up to 200 percent of the poverty line.

How are lawmakers responding? By letting this proposal languish. They're too busy worshipping at the altar of austerity to even think about it. And few local school systems have the money or the inclination.

That leaves it up to the states to pay for pre-kindergarten. Many are moving in that direction, especially Connecticut, Missouri and Hawaii. But getting the job done isn't easy.

So far, Oklahoma is the only state boasting quality and universally

available preschool. Elsewhere, when most children born into lower-income households get tossed into kindergarten at the ripe old age of five, they're ill-prepared to meet increasingly tough standards. Starting at that point, the data collectors start recording, measuring, and decrying their shortcomings.

If Oklahoma can do it, why can't the rest of the country? Or the federal government?

Still, even the best preschools are no panacea.

"High-quality pre-K is incredibly important but not a lifetime inoculation against poverty," Orfield explains. "You have to follow up and not put kids in extremely segregated schools."

After the geniuses who drummed up the testing cult move on, you can bet they'll find a new educational obsession. And so it will go until that golden day when we agree that all children deserve access to a high-quality and equal education.

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