

COMMENTARY

Stone soup



Let me be facetious, a word my 6-year-old kindergartener at the peerless Alva Elementary School just learned (he learned it, but he's far from the temperamental inclination to exercise its meaning yet, thank God).

Ready?

I'm sorry. I just don't care if Gov. Charlie Crist, that slender, silver-haired impresario of the Florida budget, cuts public school education next year by as much as \$298 million.

And I don't care if that possibility comes after he proposed only four months ago to increase spending for the runny-nosed and publicly educated, those between 5 and 18 years of age, by \$1 billion.

And I don't care if he's blaming the embarrassing shift in direction — we're talking 180 degrees on the proverbial compass — on the bad economy, or on poor lottery ticket sales, or on old fogies who can't stand to pay for kids because they say they already have, in Ohio or Indiana or Illinois or somewhere else, way back in the 1970s or '80s, when their kids were still young.

After all, kids are still going to go to school.

And some of them will come out the other end of the public system, like squirts emerging from the long intestinal tract of a goose, to land somewhere that proves we didn't have to pay much to help them anyway: at Harvard or Yale or Princeton or the service academies. Or in the hallowed halls of government, or

on archaeological digs in Africa or Southern China, or on space stations orbiting the earth, or in the director's chair of the Smithsonian or the Metropolitan, to name only a tiny few.

Or maybe they won't, but it won't be our problem, because we'll be old or dead.

As for the rest, those who might have benefited from a slightly smaller class size to get just a little more attention, or something similarly sentimental, well hell. As my uncle Franklin used to say about his cows and summer calves, Run'em out on the winter range. If they come back in the spring, we want'em in the herd.

We want survivors, in other words, not whiners who can't handle a silly little budget cut.

I know what some softies will ask: How many more kids might come out of the system as survivors, if the Florida budget for education were just a little less lean, and teachers were paid just a little more, and class sizes were just a little smaller? A couple thousand? Ten thousand? A hundred thousand?

I don't think we need to care. You can't count that figure, like you can count dead Americans in Iraq or Vietnam, for example, so it's best just to ignore it.

How the massive cut to education comes about, I don't really understand. I do know that Gov. Crist wanted to cut property taxes, as you can remember and appreciate, since you probably have property.

People with property have money. The more property they have, the more money they have, usually. And therefore, the more they can pay, but that's not the point, to many of them. Just because they have it, why should they have to pay it?

So who cares if Gov. Crist cuts the money for education?

In the meantime, here's what we know: Kids are still going to get educated because teachers are still going to show up and force

them to. The kids and teachers — and teachers are just glorified babysitters, really — will still have a few books. And at lunch they'll still get a cafeteria offering on a brown plastic tray with enough calories to propel an elephant and enough nutrients to power an amoeba. And the air conditioning will still work in the classrooms, most of the time, so nobody's suffering.

What's a paltry little cut like \$298 million, therefore (if it comes to that)? I'll bet you don't even know what \$298 million means. You can't even imagine it, any more than I can.

Come next September, meanwhile, city roads and country roads all over Lee County, and all over the state, will slow down at rush hour just like they always have, because yellow school busses navigated by men and women who feel ordained personally by The Lord will slap on the red blinking stop lights in the middle of hundreds of hurtling vehicles, and put the lives of thousands of Americans around them at risk.

At the sight of those red bus lights, drivers who manage to avoid collisions with each other or the nearest bridge abutment or telephone pole will come to a screeching halt, as the law requires. Then they'll leap out of their cars, drop to their knees and shout, "HAIL YOU KIDS, HAIL YOU KIDS, GO TO SCHOOL AND STAY OFF THE SKIDS!" (it's National Poetry month, what can I say?)

Or something like that.

At any rate, there won't be a lot of money next year, so let's get used to it. We'll still get to enjoy all the trimmings and trappings of a big-money-for-education year, like stopping for busses. The year will be just like a Thanksgiving dinner, with everything we've always had except the turkey.

Now then, let me stop being facetious.

Here, I will offer my suggestion about how to help, if you're in favor of cutting the

education budget (or just resigned to it, like me), but you still retain some small ember of heated interest in what people used to call, "our nation's youth."

This is going to be very simple, very direct, and based entirely on my own personal experiences and observations, this year. And again, I am now being as straightforward as I can possibly be.

Go to the nearest elementary school you can find, and tell the people at the front desk that you want to volunteer in the classroom, for an hour, a morning or an afternoon each week, or even for a day or two (although I warn you, spending even a few hours with children who like you and appreciate an your attention, as they inevitably do, is exhausting). Then see what happens.

If they don't welcome you with open arms, I'll be stunned.

This kind of help does not require a fancy education, it doesn't require training in classroom techniques, and it sure doesn't require good looks. I've done it myself, for God's sake, in my youngest son's kindergarten class — but not like some of the other parents and volunteers, who are there every single week, on a given day, at Alva. Both the teacher and the kids come to trust them, and come to love them, really, which is a moving thing to see.

And the difference they can make to a caring teacher who can bring along students regardless of a budget cut, or more computers, or smaller class sizes, is almost immeasurable.

Call it, "Stone Soup." Remember that old story, which is all about a lean budget? And somebody brings what he can, a stone or a carrot or something, and throws it in the pot.

And somebody else brings what she can — a potato or an onion or five hours a week — and pretty soon you share it.

Lean budget year, big feast. Everybody's a cook, everybody eats. ■



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