

No Time for Budgetary Games

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The education portion of the stimulus package passed by Congress last month could revive the national school reform effort while shielding the schools from budget cuts and teacher layoffs driven by the recession. That is a tall order, but the opportunity is there — an opportunity that could slip away if the states are not required to hold up their end of the bargain.

States sometimes play budgetary games with federal education money — cutting their own contributions and using federal dollars to plug the hole. Rules expected next week from the Department of Education need to be crystal clear on how the stabilization money can and cannot be used. They must, for instance, insist that states draw up plausible plans for finally giving poor and minority schools a fair share of experienced, qualified teachers.

Most importantly, Arne Duncan, the education secretary, needs to enforce a provision in the bill that requires states tapping into the federal fund to maintain specified levels of spending. Federal dollars cannot become a convenient excuse for cutting state expenditures.

Disputes about this and related issues have erupted all over the country. In Rhode Island, for example, the mayor of Providence, David Cicilline, has charged that the state's plan would substitute stimulus money for state spending and favor wealthy districts over poor ones. He has asked Mr. Duncan to intervene.

A similar dispute has erupted in California, which has a well-deserved reputation for budgetary sleight of hand. Localities are worried that the state government will hold on to money that should be coming to them. Most of California's Democratic representatives in the House expressed the same fears in a frosty letter to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, telling him that Congress wants the state to pass on the money quickly to local education agencies, which then would decide how to spend it.

The letter, signed by George Miller, chairman of the House education committee and one of the architects of the education package, reflects concern among influential members of Congress about a lack of clear guidance from the administration.

Congress knows that some states will suffer more than others from the recession. The bill provides leeway for states to adjust spending while still being in compliance with the law. What Congress does not want is for states to ransack the school stimulus budget to, say, build roads or pay down debt.

It's up to Mr. Duncan to promulgate clear rules in this area and to make sure that the states follow them.