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# Why Is Mulvaney Opposed to Feeding Poor Kids at School?

## **Abstract**

Folks, you've got to get a load of this guy Mick Mulvaney. Just looking at his name conjures images of a character from a gangster novel set during Prohibition, but he's actually the Trump White House's director of the Office of Management and Budget. That means he's the hatchet man—the guy responsible for making sure everything Trump wants to cut gets cut. And it means he's a real human, too. Allegedly.

Case in point: Mulvaney has been producing amazing sound bites lately to explain the contents of Trump's proposed federal budget. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Mick Mulvaney, Office of Management and Budget, 21st Century Community Learning Centers program, school meals, PISA scores

## **Disciplines**

Education Policy | Elementary Education | Secondary Education

## **Comments**

This piece appeared on *Education Week* as part of Dr. Powell's opinion blog, "The K-12 Contrarian." The original version is available online [here](#).



## Why Is Mulvaney Opposed to Feeding Poor Kids at School?

By Dave Powell on March 18, 2017 10:33 AM |

Folks, you've got to get a load of this guy Mick Mulvaney. Just looking at his name conjures images of a character from a gangster novel set during Prohibition, but he's actually the Trump White House's director of the Office of Management and Budget. That means he's the hatchet man—the guy responsible for making sure everything Trump wants to cut gets cut. And it means he's a real human, too. Allegedly.

Case in point: Mulvaney has been producing amazing sound bites lately to explain the contents of Trump's proposed federal budget. Here's one of them right here: it's [Mulvaney talking about programs like the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program](#), which, among other things, provides meals to kids in before- and after-school programs designed to improve their academic performance. In case you can't see the video I typed up a transcript:

They're supposed to be educational programs, right? And that's what they're supposed to do. They're supposed to help kids who don't get fed at home get fed so they do better in school. Guess what? There's no demonstrable evidence they're actually doing that. There's no demonstrable evidence they're actually helping results, helping kids do better in school.

Ahh...where to begin? As Mulvaney correctly notes, one objective of the program is to provide food to kids *who don't get fed at home so they can do better in school*. Zeroing out that program, then, would mean denying some kids who take advantage of it—kids who, by Mulvaney's own admission, already don't get fed at home—an opportunity to spend additional time at school and get a meal to boot. But those ungrateful kids aren't holding up their end of the bargain. They're getting their free food, but they are not delivering the results we expect. The obvious solution is to stop giving them the food. Let them eat cake? No. Let them eat nothing.

That's just ridiculous to the point of absurdity. Maybe Mulvaney didn't check the optics of getting on TV and earnestly defending cuts to a program that shouldn't have to provide evidence of high test scores to be defensible—did the kids get a meal they wouldn't have gotten otherwise? did they also receive some tutoring? looks like the program is working!—but, then again, this is the guy who also said Meals on Wheels is "not showing results" when, in fact,

[meals are being delivered on wheels and showing all kinds of positive results](#). He doesn't seem to be too concerned about optics.

But the larger point Mulvaney is making is one that offends almost as much. What Mulvaney is trying to say, in his own awful way, is that our schools are failing—have you heard the news?!?—and we just can't afford to pay for anything anymore that doesn't reverse that trend. We're that broke. He's parroting a line we've all heard too many times: accountability, poor results, wasteful spending. It's all of a piece. Hating on public schools is a pastime in America these days, and it seems that the further you get from them the easier it is to do.

It hasn't always been that way, but that's not the point anymore. The point is that we've been told a tale about our public schools that reflects part of the reality of public education but leaves out too many important parts of the story. The story is that we don't *achieve* enough, despite spending too much. Public education, we're told, is a bad investment. We give too much and get too little in return. But how true is it?

## **PISA Scores Don't Tell The Whole Story**

It's no stretch to say: not at all. No, our kids do not lead the world in achievement on the one widely-given international test that is used to judge the education systems of the world's most developed countries. You know who kills it on those tests? Macau. Singapore. Canada. Ireland. Finland. Hong Kong. Taiwan. Notice a trend? Of the [countries finishing in the top 5 on the PISA tests](#) that were administered in 2015, the one with the largest population was Japan, which has about 127 million inhabitants. The next largest was Canada, which checks in at around 30 million. Population numbers go down from there. Only about a half a million people live in Macau, which means it's smaller than Vermont. The United States, at last check, had approximately 319 million people in it. And every one of them is or has been welcome to attend a public school. Because that's how we do it.

Is size all that matters in these rankings? Of course not. There are smaller countries at the bottom of the list too. That's because [there's another factor that makes a difference in PISA test scores: it's wealth](#). Students from smaller, wealthier countries, unsurprisingly, do well on this test. Those from smaller, poorer countries do not do so well. It might be more accurate to say that less equal societies do more poorly, especially if they are larger. China, of course, is the largest on the list. Chinese students do really well in math and science, as you've probably heard. Did you know China lags behind the U.S. in reading? Did you also know that students in Massachusetts, one of the wealthiest U.S. states, earned science scores in 2015 that would have placed them 6th in the world on these rankings?

So we're big and relatively rich, but we spread our wealth unevenly—which explains the middling scores our students bring back on this one test. That's because there's another factor at play: inequality. We've chosen a path to school reform that exacerbates our weaknesses while doing nothing to highlight or build on our strengths. We recognized our relatively low scores and then opted for a high-stakes accountability solution that only makes them worse by punishing the under-resourced schools with the students in them who do most poorly on the tests. It might have worked in a more equal society, but it hasn't worked in ours.

## **This Isn't About Education at All; It's About Politics**

This *still* doesn't tell the whole story though. Our math scores need work, but our reading and science scores are in the top third of the rankings. Given the incredible size of our public system, and our deep and abiding love for "local control," scoring in the top third should be recognized as a tremendous accomplishment. Why are the apocalypse alarms sounded every time these test scores come out?

I think I know why: it's because this isn't about education at all. It's about politics, and it always has been. It's about using education as a cudgel to beat us into believing that our society has failed. We're supposed to believe that starry-eyed efforts to build a "Great Society" between the 1930s and 1980 were ignorant and foolish and (get ready to clutch those pearls) *unconstitutional*. There is nothing in the Constitution, they say, that gives the federal government the right to feed poor kids. You think Jefferson and Madison and Washington sat around worrying about how to feed poor kids in school? If they did, they would have put it in the Constitution.

That kind of ahistorical nonsense sounds ridiculous, but it's what a lot of people believe. One of these true believers gave me a lecture on Twitter last week, 140 characters at a time, about how it all went wrong as soon as we decided that everybody should have access to education and health care. Because that's unconstitutional, this person said. That's what they say whenever someone suggests a policy they don't like.

## **We Need a Soft Power Budget, Not a Hard Power Budget**

Which brings us back to that gangster Mick Mulvaney—the reverse Robin Hood, [the guy charged with robbing the old and poor so he can give it back to the rich](#). The thing is, if you want to solve the achievement problem you're not going to do it by starving poor kids. Crazy as it might sound, you'll get closer to solving that problem by providing a nutritious lunch to *every* kid, rich or poor. If we made our schools more equal, our achievement scores would rise. I'm willing to guarantee it. No, I don't have "demonstrable evidence" to prove it, but that's because we've haven't tried it yet. [I'm listing the Finns as a reference](#), though, if you want to check in with them.

But the cherry on top here is that Mulvaney thinks he's actually being *compassionate* by trying to zero out programs like 21st Century Community Learning Centers. "I can't go to the autoworker in Ohio and say please give me some of your money so that I can do this program over here someplace else that really isn't helping anybody," [he also said](#). "Can we really continue to ask a coal miner in West Virginia or a single mom in Detroit to pay for these programs?" [he wonders](#). No, of course not. It just wouldn't be fair. What kind of world would we be living in if an employed adult autoworker had to pay pennies a day in taxes to buy lunch for kids at the local elementary school so they could focus on their school work?

I know this much: that's the world I want to live in. Not this one, where school lunches and Meals on Wheels are dismissed as useless luxuries that keep the takers going while the givers suffer. That's not my kind of compassion. I'm betting it's not yours, either. I mean, we've all

heard the argument before: when Americans sit around the dinner table trying to figure out how to cut costs, hard choices have to be made. But have you ever known anyone who said: "Well, it's going to be a tough month. We've got some money, but we really ought to use it to buy a new gun. We can just skip eating this month. And don't go to school, either. All they do there is brainwash you, and now they're not even serving lunch!"

[That's the world they're creating for us.](#) "Hard power" might sound cool to insecure millionaires but for the rest of us trying to get by, soft power will do just fine. It seems to be working pretty well in Finland, Macau, Hong Kong, and Japan. Maybe we should give it a shot.