

grade, the best methods to teach reading. We found them, and we educated our teachers in those methods, and it worked.

We tried to make it the case that no kid makes it to graduation day in Louisiana without being able to read. In fact, we passed another law a couple of years ago. I worked very hard on this. It says: If you are in the third grade, at the end of the third grade, you are going to be tested for reading. If you can't read at a third-grade level, we are going to test you again. If you can't read at a third-grade level at the end of the third grade, we are going to test you one more time. If you still fail, you are not going to the fourth grade. You are going to stay in the third grade until you learn how to read. You might be 16 years old in the third grade, but, by God, you are not going to the fourth grade until you can learn how to read.

Now, we don't just leave the kids on their own if they can't read at the end of the third grade after being tested a couple of times. We give them what we call high-dose tutoring. We tutor them and tutor them and tutor them until they can read, and then they can move on. Because do you know when kids drop out of school? Kids don't drop out of school in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grade; they drop out of school in the 2nd grade, the 3rd grade, when they can't learn how to read and nobody cares. They are just socially promoted. We stopped doing that in Louisiana.

We also started giving parents a choice in public education.

You know, competition makes us better. It makes you better. It makes me better. Competition makes all of us better. Most parents—not all—most parents are far more invested in their kids' academic success than any teacher—I don't care how well-meaning the teacher is—than any teacher, any school administrator, or any Federal bureaucratic.

Most parents—not all, unfortunately, but most parents in America do not want their kids to be stuck in a school where violence is common and learning is rare. They don't.

Several States throughout the country—I am going to mention four in particular, but they are not the only ones. I am going to mention Florida, Iowa, North Dakota, and Utah. Congratulations to them all. They have implemented successfully school-choice programs. Utah may be the best, Mr. President. This gives parents the ability to do just what it says—gives parents a choice. They can send their kid to a public school. They can send their kid to a private school. They can send their child to a charter school.

Charter schools are tuition-free. Charter schools are public schools. They are tuition-free. But they are not run by the education bureaucracy; they are almost always run by parents and caring adults. They don't have to follow all the redtape in their local school district. They can experiment. They are independent, they are free, and they work.

Every one of these States that I mentioned—their programs are different, but each State that I mentioned—and I want to mention them again because they deserve praise—Utah, North Dakota, Iowa, and Florida. They all have a few things in common. They all allow parents to decide which school will get their kids' share of State and Federal tax dollars.

As you know, Mr. President, we fund our public schools through three sources of revenue. The largest is usually local government. In my State, about half of the money comes from local government, about 40 percent comes from the State government, and about 10 percent comes from the Federal Government. So it is mostly local money, but it is also State money to a large extent and some Federal money. But these are all tax dollars.

In these States that I just described, if parents are happy with the current public school their child is enrolled in, they can tell the State: OK, spend that money per child—that I just described—in my child's school. I am happy with my current school.

But if the parents aren't happy, they can seek another school that is a better fit and move that money. They can choose to take their child's funding to a different school to give that kid a better outcome.

This gives parents a choice, but it also—do you know what else it does? It gets some of our schools off their ice-cold, lazy butts. It makes schools compete, and competition makes all of us better.

There have been a number of studies on school-choice States, and almost all of them have found that these programs, this program of choice—you get to choose which public school you want your child to go to or you can send your child to a private school—this choice results in higher test scores, higher parental satisfaction, and higher student safety.

Last year, Louisiana joined the choice move. I am very proud of that. Our legislature passed a school-choice program. We call it the GATOR Act. Starting this fall, certain students—not all of our kids; we are going to eventually ramp it up so that it does impact all of our kids—but certain of our kids will be able to tap into State-funded education savings accounts that parents can use to pay for their child to attend a different public or a different private or a different charter school. Our goal is 3 years. In 3 years, every student in Louisiana will be eligible to participate in this choice program.

I want to say it again. I am not saying Louisiana's scores are perfect. I am not saying that. But it is undeniable that we are on the right track. We are. We stayed open for the most part during the pandemic. We trained our teachers. We have established standards. You can't go to the fourth grade until you can read. We have implemented parental choice.

I think President Trump—and I don't want to just limit this to Republicans. Many of my Democratic colleagues believe in choice as well. Sometimes they can't be as vocal about it, but I know; I talked to them. They understand, as does the White House, that America's future is sitting in these classrooms every day throughout the country.

I have said it a zillion times, a squillion times in Louisiana. The key to Louisiana's future is not the price of oil. It is not what the unemployment rate is. It is not who the Senator is or who the Governor is. It is education.

The status quo in America isn't working. We didn't make it any better as a result of our behavior with respect to the pandemic, and we are behind, but we can catch up if we just do the right things.

One of those things is returning education to the States. I hope we do dismantle the Department of Education. It is basically a conduit for money—except that money goes through the Department of Education and the 4,000 employees there, and they all put a condition on the money as if they knew what was best for each State. They don't. We ought to dismantle the Department of Education and send that money directly to the States.

Thank you, Mr. President, for your courtesy. Congratulations on the progress that the wonderful State of Utah has made in elementary and secondary education.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

BUDGET RECONCILIATION

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, the American people, whether they are Democrats, Republicans, or Independents, understand that we have a corrupt campaign finance system which allows billionaires and their lobbyists to play an extraordinarily powerful role in electing candidates and defeating candidates and in crafting legislation. This is through both parties—the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Money talks. But, today, with Republicans in control of the White House, of the U.S. Senate, and of the U.S. House, we are seeing day by day how this corrupt process plays out for the priorities of the Republican Party and for their billionaire campaign contributors.

Their so-called reconciliation bill—President Trump's "big, beautiful bill"—that the Republicans are putting together right now in the House—is a rather extraordinary piece of legislation. In many respects, given the crises facing our country, this legislation does exactly the opposite of what should be done. It is rather remarkable. You have got a problem, and instead of addressing the problem, they make the problem worse.

It is no secret that we have more income and wealth inequality in our Nation today than we have ever had. It is a serious problem. Today, the wealthiest person in the world—Mr. Elon

Musk, who is now worth more than \$400 billion—owns more wealth than the bottom 52 percent of American society. One person owns more wealth than the bottom 52 percent of American households. It is rather extraordinary. The top 1 percent now owns more wealth than the bottom 93 percent, and CEOs of large corporations now make about 350 times what their workers make. Unbelievably, according to the RAND Corporation, over the past 50 years, nearly \$80 trillion—that is a “t,” \$80 trillion—in wealth has been redistributed from the bottom 90 percent of the American people to the top 1 percent. So what we have seen is that the very wealthiest people in America are becoming much richer while, at the same time, 60 percent of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck, and many millions of families are struggling to just put food on the table. That is the economic reality of today.

So what does President Trump’s and Republicans’ reconciliation bill do to address this grossly unfair and, in my view, unstable economic situation? What are they doing when the very rich are becoming much richer while working families struggle?

Well, here is the answer: This legislation makes the rich and wealthy campaign contributors even richer while making life harder and more stressful for the working families of our country. This legislation provides massive tax breaks to the top 1 percent and large corporations and pays for these tax cuts by cutting Medicaid, the Affordable Care Act, nutrition, education, and other programs that are life and death for working families. Let me just give you one example of how outrageous this legislation is.

As currently written, this bill provides a \$235 billion tax break to the top two-tenths of 1 percent by increasing the estate tax exemption for couples to \$30 million. I am not talking about the top 2 percent. I am talking about the top two-tenths of 1 percent. The estate tax is only applicable to the very wealthiest people in this country who inherit substantial sums of money from a relative. Under this provision in this reconciliation bill, a couple that inherits \$30 million would now pay zero tax on that inheritance. Once again, this provision applies only to the top two-tenths of 1 percent of Americans—the very, very wealthiest people in this country and people who just coincidentally, I know, make massive campaign contributions to the Republican Party. Coincidence, no doubt, while 99.8 percent of Americans would not benefit by one nickel under this provision. This is the top two-tenths of 1 percent with \$235 billion in tax breaks.

Further, this legislation would provide a \$420 billion tax break to large, profitable corporations that are stashing their profits in the Cayman Islands and other offshore tax havens and which are, by the way, replacing American workers with robots. They get a tax break for throwing American work-

ers out on the street and replacing them with new technology.

The bottom line: The tax provisions in this reconciliation bill provide huge tax breaks to the people in our country who need it the least while doing great harm to ordinary Americans.

Again, whether you are a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent, you know that our current healthcare system is broken; it is dysfunctional; it is cruel; it is wildly expensive. Despite spending almost twice as much per capita on healthcare as any other major nation, some 85 million Americans are uninsured or underinsured, and we remain the only major country on Earth that does not guarantee healthcare to all people as a human right.

So, given that reality—the reality of a broken, wildly expensive healthcare system—how does this reconciliation bill address the healthcare crisis in America? Does it expand healthcare to more Americans and lower the number of uninsured? You have got 85 million right now. Does it lower that number? Does it take on the greed of the insurance companies and the drug companies that make tens and tens of billions of dollars every single year by ripping off the people of our country? Is that what this reconciliation bill does?

Not quite.

What this legislation, in fact, does do is cut Medicaid and the Affordable Care Act by \$715 billion, which the Congressional Budget Office has estimated would eliminate health insurance for 13.7 million Americans. In other words, this legislation makes a very bad situation, in terms of our healthcare crisis, catastrophically worse. If we were to pass this bill, the number of Americans who would be uninsured or underinsured would rise to almost 100 million Americans. In other words, instead of lowering the number of uninsured or underinsured people in this country, this bill greatly increases that number, but that is not all that this legislation does.

This bill, for the first time, forces millions of Medicaid recipients who make as little as \$16,000 a year to pay a copay of \$35 each time they visit a doctor when they get sick—up to 5 percent of their annual income. Well, what will be the impact of that?

According to a study from Yale University, some 68,000 Americans die every year because they don’t go to a doctor on time. I don’t know about the Presiding Officer, but I have talked to doctors in Vermont and all over this country, and they tell me that patients walk in their doors very, very sick.

They say to the patients: Well, why didn’t you come in earlier when you first felt your symptoms?

And what the patients will say is, Well, you know, I don’t have any health insurance or I can’t afford the copayment or I can’t afford the deductible or the deductible hasn’t kicked in yet.

And they don’t go. Some of these people walk into a doctor’s office so

sick that they die when that should not have been the case.

Now, if you are making a good salary—if you are making a couple hundred thousand dollars a year—the odds are that a \$35 copayment, which many people have, will not deter you from going to the doctor. You may not like it, but you fork over the 35 bucks, and you go to the doctor when you are sick, but if you are a low-income American and if you are struggling to pay the rent or you are struggling to buy food for your kids or to pay for childcare, that \$35 copay may be just too much, and the result is that you don’t see the doctor when you should.

When you throw almost 14 million Americans off of the health insurance they have and when you force low-income people to pay a \$35 copayment that they can’t afford to pay, no one can deny that many thousands more Americans will die if this bill is signed into law. If this bill is signed into law, we are providing a death sentence for many thousands and thousands of people. That is just the simple reality, and nobody can deny that.

Further, when Trump and the Republicans in the House make massive cuts to Medicaid, they are also making massive cuts to community health centers, which provide primary healthcare to 32 million low-income and working-class Americans. In other words, the cuts to Medicaid go well beyond the immediate impact on the individuals who will lose their health insurance; it impacts the entire healthcare community. Community health centers rely on Medicaid for 43 percent of their revenue. When you cut hundreds of billions of dollars in Medicaid, you are significantly cutting back on the access that millions of low-income and working-class Americans will have through primary healthcare.

Once again, community health centers, which provide healthcare to 32 million Americans—many of them in Vermont and all over this country—are struggling today. Make massive cuts to Medicaid, and it will be a disaster for these community health centers and the people who utilize them for primary care.

It is not just community health centers that would be devastated by this legislation. All across this country, rural hospitals are shutting down and facing enormous financial pressure—all over this country. This legislation will only accelerate those closures and bring increased hardship to rural America at a time when rural America already has quite enough problems.

Here is what Rick Pollack, the President and CEO of the American Hospital Association, said:

These proposed cuts will not make the Medicaid program work better for the 72 million Americans who rely on it. Instead, it will lead to millions of hard-working Americans losing access to healthcare and many of our Nation’s hospitals struggling to maintain services and stay open for their communities.

No question, this Medicaid cut will result in rural hospitals being shut down in increasing numbers.

Further, I hope my colleagues will listen to what Bruce Siegel, the president and CEO of America's Essential Hospitals, said in opposition to this bill:

Hospitals, which already operate on thin margins, cannot absorb such losses without reducing services or closing their doors altogether.

That is exactly what rural America does not need. We don't need more hospitals shutting down. We cannot allow that to happen.

Let's be clear. It is not just hospitals and community health centers that are opposed to this legislation; physicians throughout this country have also come out in strong opposition to this legislation.

Let me read from a statement issued today—today—in opposition to this bill from the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American College of Physicians, and the American Psychiatric Association:

Our organizations, representing more than 400,000 physicians who serve millions of patients, are alarmed by proposals to implement cuts or other structural changes to Medicaid during the budget reconciliation process. Cuts to Medicaid will have grave consequences for patients, communities and the entire health care system. With reduced federal funding, it will be harder for patients to access care, states will be forced to drop enrollees from coverage, and it will limit the health care services patients can access and cut payment rates.

The impact of cuts to Medicaid funding is significant and wide-reaching, and it must be reconsidered.

That is what medical organizations in our country, representing 400,000 doctors, are saying about this disastrous piece of legislation.

Further, at a time when some 22 percent of our seniors are trying to survive on less than \$15,000 a year—I will never understand how anybody, let alone a senior, can survive on less than \$15,000 a year—this legislation will make it much harder for seniors and people with disabilities to receive the care they desperately need in nursing homes.

When Medicaid provides over 60 percent of the revenue nursing homes rely on, slashing Medicaid will be a disaster for seniors and the disabled who need to be in nursing homes and their kids as well.

When you cut Medicaid, it is not just throwing up to 13 million people off of the health insurance they have; it is going to be very destructive for community health centers to provide the healthcare they need, very destructive to hospitals all over this country, especially small rural hospitals, and destructive to nursing homes as well.

That is not all that this legislation is doing. For the vast majority of Americans, including myself, who believe that women should have the right to

control their own bodies, this bill essentially defunds Planned Parenthood, which provides vital healthcare to millions of women.

It is not just our healthcare system that would be devastated under this legislation. While this bill provides massive tax breaks to billionaires, it would cut \$290 billion from nutrition programs. That would take food away from an estimated 4 million children and about half a million seniors.

I don't know if there is any religion in this world where it would be morally appropriate to take food out of the mouths of hungry kids and frail seniors in order to provide more tax breaks to billionaires. That is simply and grossly immoral.

Further, for the many young people in our country struggling with student debt and others who wonder how they will ever be able to afford to go to college, this bill cuts Federal funding for education by more than \$350 billion.

Now, what does that mean? Among other things, it means that the average student loan borrower with a bachelor's degree in America would see his or her loan payments increase by about \$3,000 a year or some \$244 a month. So at a time when college is now unaffordable for millions of young people, at a time when we desperately need a well-educated population and the best educated workforce in the world, this bill moves us in precisely the wrong direction.

Finally, at a time when we already spend more on the military than the next nine nations combined and when everyone knows—whether you are Republican, Democrat, or Independent, everyone knows there is massive waste and fraud in the Pentagon. The Pentagon has not been able to take an independent audit for God knows how many years. This bill increases defense spending by \$150 billion.

Let's be clear. This is just some of what is in this terrible bill. There are other provisions equally damaging which I have not touched upon.

It seems clear to me and I expect the majority of Americans that this bill reflects exactly what is wrong with our current corrupt political system.

When we have massive income and wealth inequality, our job is to demand that the wealthy and large corporations start paying their fair share of taxes, not do as this bill provides—give huge tax breaks to the very rich.

When 85 million Americans are uninsured or underinsured, our job should be to guarantee healthcare to every man, woman, and child in this country, not throw 13 million Americans off of the healthcare they currently have.

When children and seniors in this country go hungry here in the wealthiest country on Earth, our job should be to make sure that all Americans have the nutrition they need to live healthy lives, not increase the level of hunger in our country.

In many respects, this bill represents exactly why so many Americans are

giving up on democracy and have such contempt for Congress. At a time when the richest people have never ever had it so good, they see Republican leadership working overtime to make the billionaire class even richer.

At a time when a majority of Americans are struggling to put food on the table and pay for healthcare, they see Republican leadership making life even more difficult for average Americans.

This is a disastrous piece of legislation. I urge my colleagues to oppose it. I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

IMMIGRATION

Mr. WELCH. Mr. President, President Trump has been in office for 113 days. On nearly every one of those days, he has announced another very dangerous attack on the Constitution and on our system of justice.

The recent shocking news that the administration plans to deport migrants to Libya—a country that is in chaos, where the prisons are a version of hell—is just a recent example.

I hate to say this, but it is true. It is not just what the Trump administration does; it is the cavalier cruelty by which the administration does it. That cruelty is described in heart-wrenching detail by the Washington Post in a recent article entitled “Trump's 48-hour scramble to fly migrants to a Salvadoran prison.”

The article describes the Trump administration officials who, in their rush to deport a million migrants, have knowingly and flagrantly trampled on the rights of people who are in this country legally—in this country legally.

The Post reviewed court records and conducted interviews of more than 50 men who are believed to be held at the Terrorism Confinement Center, or CECOT, in El Salvador. The Post found:

[D]espite the administration's claims, many of the immigrants sent to El Salvador had entered the United States legally and were actively complying with U.S. immigration rules.

The review by the Post also found:

At least two of the men imprisoned in El Salvador had been approved—

Approved—

by the State Department to resettle as refugees in the United States after [very] extensive vetting by federal law enforcement authorities. . . . At least four had protections against removal through temporary protected status . . . granted to those fleeing Venezuela's humanitarian crisis. . . . Others had been active members of Venezuela's opposition and had open asylum claims.

In other words, these were folks who were friends of freedom. Suddenly, without producing any credible evidence, they are now called “terrorists”—no new evidence.

Prisoners at CECOT—they are abandoned, they are lost, and they are forgotten. They have no access to family or lawyers, no semblance of due process to prove their innocence, and no idea