

How Jr. ROTC Contributes to the School Funding Crisis

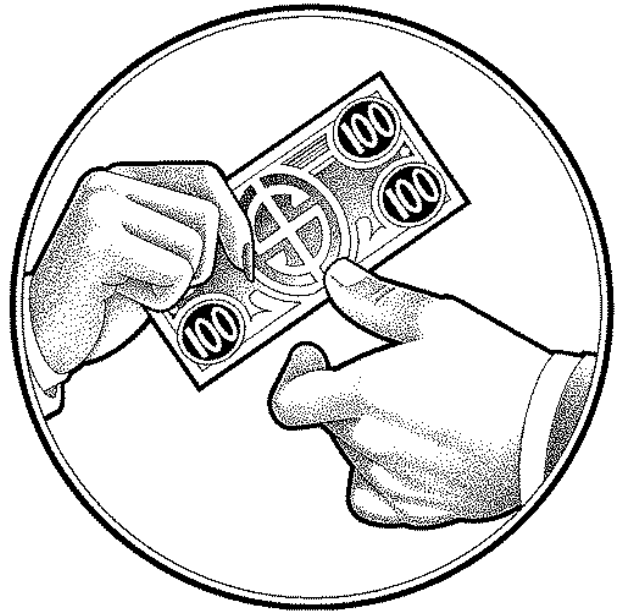
- Rick Jahnkow

As sources of public money for public education shrink, K-12 school districts are being forced to consider budget cuts that will seriously affect classes and student services. In some places they are reducing or eliminating counselors, school nurses, teacher aides, librarians, and programs like art, music and athletics.

One program that is rarely subjected to cuts is the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC), a military training/recruiting program that is currently offered in approximately 4,000 of the nation's high schools. Even though this course is a non-academic elective that does not count toward meeting admission requirements at state colleges and universities -- and schools are scrambling to provide electives that do help students meet those requirements -- JROTC is usually given privileged treatment by school trustees who are politically intimidated by the pro-JROTC lobby and often deceived about the money that could be saved by cutting the program.

There are a lot of reasons to be concerned about the presence of a military-run program in public schools -- for example, the propagandistic character of the curriculum, the questionable credentials of the instructors, and the fact that JROTC brings marksmanship training into most of the schools where it exists. Public debate over these concerns, however, has never led school trustees to remove a JROTC unit. In large part, this is because of the well-organized lobby that emerges from JROTC classes themselves. There is considerable politicking by instructors, and the military structure of the program allows them to easily mobilize cadets and their families.

This lobby, however, has sometimes failed to prevail when a school district with major financial problems looks closely at the cost of JROTC. They discover that, in comparison to alternative classes, JROTC is much more expensive to maintain than school administrators and trustees have been led to believe. The reason their initial assumptions are often wrong is that promoters of JROTC encourage the false belief that federal money will cover any extra costs. After approving the program, most school administrators



never realize that the partial subsidy offered by the Pentagon (which comes from its recruiting budget, by the way) does not match the additional expenses generated by the high staffing requirements of the JROTC contract.

How JROTC is a net drain on civilian school funds

Under the standard JROTC contract, the Department of Defense provides students with books, uniforms and special equipment such as pellet rifles. The school district must provide insurance, building facilities and maintenance, and **must assume responsibility for paying instructors' salaries and all the normal employment taxes and benefits that cover regular teachers.** JROTC instructors must be retired military officers approved by their military branches. They are not required to meet the same qualifications as other teachers.

The school district receives from the DoD only a partial contribution toward instructors' salaries and **nothing** toward the substantial cost of employment taxes and benefits. The subsidy amount for each instructor is calculated based on the military pay and housing allowance the officer would receive on active duty, **minus** his or her military retirement pay. This difference is then cut in half and the result is the **maximum** amount the DoD will pay the school district.

The JROTC contract requires the hiring of a minimum of **two** retired officers (one a non-

commissioned officer) for the first 150 students enrolled as cadets at a school. After 150, another instructor must be hired for each additional increment of 100 cadets (e.g., three instructors for 151-250).

It's important to note that only **one** non-JROTC classroom teacher would normally be hired to teach 150+ students. Furthermore, JROTC cadets are generally allowed by schools to take the class in place of physical education, and a single PE teacher would normally support 250+ students. So if JROTC instructors were eliminated in a school district, less than half as many teachers would need to be hired to replace them.

In other words, to have JROTC, a school district must more than double the staff normally required for the number of students involved. Because the federal subsidy amount will likely cover less than half the total salaries and **none** of the employment taxes or benefits for two (or more) JROTC instructors at each school, schools wind up using extra money from their budgets to, in effect, subsidize a high school military training/recruiting program for the Pentagon.

An example of a specific school district

When Air Force JROTC was introduced in 1995 at Vista High School in Vista, California, the projected net cost to the district for two JROTC instructors to teach 95 cadets was:

Salary, plus taxes and benefits	\$79,386
Federal subsidy	<u>-28,305</u>
Net JROTC expense	51,081

In comparison, one PE teacher was allocated for an average of 250 students at Vista HS, therefore .38 of one PE teaching position would have been required for those 95 cadets. The total cost for that portion of a PE teaching position, including taxes and benefits, was \$52,250 x .38 = \$19,855.

The projected net loss to the Vista school district was:

Net JROTC expense	\$51,081
Net cost for .38 PE allocation	<u>-19,855</u>
Net <u>loss</u> of funds	31,226

(Data source: Vista Unified School District, 1995)

If one assumes the same salary and benefits rates in a district with 13 JROTC schools (San Diego Unified, for example), the annual budget loss would have been \$405,938 in 1995.

While it is certain that the numbers for salaries and benefits have increased since 1995, the basic formula for calculating the true cost of JROTC is the same today: determine the total net cost for all JROTC staff and subtract the total net cost for alternative teaching staff needed to support the number of students in JROTC. The difference will reveal how much additional money would be freed up for other uses if JROTC were cut from the district's budget.

School trustees are often given budget summaries from district staff that include the net cost for JROTC, but without the critical comparison to the cost for substituting JROTC with classes like PE. This makes it difficult for them to make fully informed decisions about which programs to eliminate when they need to make budget cuts.

People who would like to draw a district's attention to the true cost of the program should try to find out what JROTC budget figures have already been circulated, which may be available on a school district's web site. If the information is not available, or if it is lacking a comparative analysis, school trustees can be asked to provide specific facts about the program's cost. In the process, trustees may come to realize that their assumptions about JROTC's economics were based on false or incomplete information. With a more accurate financial picture, they would be more likely to consider cutting JROTC as a potential way to resolve a budget crisis.

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