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CONGRESS SHOULD LEARN FROM FAMILIES - INVEST IN PRIORITIES AND SAVE FOR THE FUTURE

OP-ED IN *RIVER NORTH NEWS* BY SCHAKOWSKY

WASHINGTON, D.C. - We are at a remarkable and prosperous point in our history. For the first time in recent memory, our nation is enjoying a budget surplus. We should use that opportunity to pass a budget that sets national priorities and do what is right for the American people. And if we needed some guidance as to how we can accomplish that goal, all we need to do is turn to the wise decisions families make when they have some extra money. They fix the roof, save for their children's college, or pay off some of their debts.

But instead of investing in the future, Republicans in Congress voted to approve a budget that will squander hundreds of billions of surplus dollars on a tax giveaway to the wealthiest of Americans. And at what expense? This tax cut will come at the expense of health care, Medicare, Social Security, prescription drugs for seniors and education.

As a mother and as a grandmother, I am very concerned about the commitment the Bush Administration has show to education. As a U.S. Representative, I have visited schools in my district and spoke with concerned parents, in Chicago and in the suburbs. What did I find? I found schools that are overcrowded; classes that are being held in the hallways; students that are learning in makeshift classrooms, like the teachers' lounge and cafeteria; and three different classes being taught at the same time in the same room. There are even schools with such outdated wiring that teachers and students can't plug in new computers.

We have the money now to invest in school construction, to provide after-school programs, and early childhood education. These are the things that would benefit all of our children and they are well within our reach. Instead, the President's education budget barely increases education funding above the rate of inflation, a sad boost from the so-called education President. As for school construction and modernization, this President deserves an F. President Bush and his Republican colleagues failed to include one dollar in this year's budget to help states like Illinois provide a safe and modern schools for our children.

This budget also slashes \$2 billion from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, money that could go to provide affordable housing to seniors and hard working families living in Chicago. There is no doubt that we are experiencing an affordable housing crisis nationwide. In Chicago alone, we are short about 155,000 affordable housing units. So as a consequence of this shortsighted budget, and at a time when we have enough resources, we will fall well short of helping millions of people with their housing needs.

As for programs that have formed the basis of our security net in this country, and have lifted seniors out of poverty and provided health care for our elders and people with disability, widows and orphans, they are in serious risk as a result of this budget. This budget raids the Medicare Trust Fund to pay for an inadequate prescription drug benefit, while threatening the integrity of the Social Security Trust Fund. Seniors citizens who thought candidate George Bush was for a prescription drug benefit under Medicare are in for a rude surprise. Looking closely at the Republican budget, that prescription plan is not there. There is a measly program that will go to seniors, some of whom earn \$11,500 or less. But we know even middle-income seniors are going broke because they cannot buy their prescription drugs. Where is the prescription drug benefit under Medicare? It is not there.

The truth is this budget is wrong on all fronts. Future investments in alternative energy, health care like the Ryan White Care Act, environmental protection and other vital areas are either cut or completely eliminated. That is not wise planning for the future. We should use our budget surplus to invest in the long term financial security and priorities of our nation. Families in the United States do just that on a daily basis, they plan for their future. Congress and the Administration should follow suit.