

**Testimony of Courtney Johnson,  
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**“The Economic and Budget Outlook for Individuals, Families, and Communities”  
Before the  
U.S. Senate Budget Committee  
*February 25, 2014***

Thank you Chairwoman Murray and members of the committee for inviting me to speak to you today.

Three years ago, when I came here to Washington DC to talk to Congress about why, as a teacher, I valued collective bargaining, I would have considered myself solidly in the middle class. Today, like so many others, my family’s foothold in the middle class has become perilous.

I am a high school English teacher at a public arts magnet school in Columbus, Ohio. My large urban school district is in financial trouble. State budget cuts, federal sequester cuts, indirect cuts through charter school and voucher programs, and the end of one-time Race to the Top money means that many good teachers will lose their jobs. I worry that I will be laid off in the coming weeks as my district has to find a way to trim \$50 million more from our already bare bones budget. My husband, who holds a degree in Health Care Administration, was laid off last month. In the past few years, we have made two major moves, suffered two job losses, and had to rely on Brad’s 401(k) to stay afloat. We know that we are fortunate to have had that money.

But we live under constant anxiety that I will be laid off, that Brad won’t find another job, and that we won’t be able to sell our home should we need to find more affordable housing. I bring home less in my paycheck now than I did three years ago. Our governor has raised the sales tax spreading my smaller paychecks thinner and thinner. We cannot even fathom saving for college for our son, Brady, as we are still paying for our three degrees between the two of us. We only had one child because the cost of quality child-care was too much. And yet, we are fortunate. When I compare my family’s situation to my students’ families, I know that we are fortunate.

I don’t know all of the specific policies that have contributed to the decline of the middle class, but I know that when folks don’t have good jobs, everything else in our society unravels. When we cannot meet our basic needs of safety and security, we can’t care about much else. As any teacher will tell you, it’s about the hierarchy of needs. I care very much about many issues: public education, women’s rights, worker’s rights, voting rights, but most of all I care about whether or not we have jobs in my community. If I have to work three low-wage jobs, I don’t have time to help my kids learn to read or do their homework. I can’t send my kid to college. I don’t have time to be an informed voter. I don’t have time to care about anything but paying my bills and making sure my family is fed.

Anti-worker policies like the erosion of collective bargaining, wage stagnation, and free trade agreements have destroyed the middle class that labor built. I just read in *The New York Times* a couple of weeks ago that the top 40 hedge fund managers make as much as a third of all high

school teachers in America combined.<sup>1</sup> Where are we as a country when we do not value and respect the dignity of work?

I am frustrated that the pathways to the middle class that existed for my generation no longer exist for my students or my son. Why does the American dream have to end with me?

When I was a little girl growing up in Ironton, Ohio, I knew that college was how I entered the middle class. Becoming a teacher was not something I settled for as a career. I made a choice. Teaching was my pathway to making a middle class life that would allow me to build lives, too. Where are we as a country when the folks who teach our children can't have a stable economic avenue into the middle class?

That college opportunity that I was privileged to have isn't there for many of my students. Just last week, I was sitting with a bright young senior as she anxiously scrolled through her college application. She put her head in her hands, and said, "I just want to go to college." How will she afford it? It is heartbreaking, and I don't have an answer for her. We are complicit in a system where wealth protects wealth, and college is the new lotto ticket. Community college or bust is the story of dreams deferred. We are telling young people "college is not for you." We are the first generation to break Horace Mann's vision for America. He said, "Education is the great equalizer." Where are we as a country when our young folks have no hope of a pathway out of poverty and into the middle class?

We can create a world where kids can have hope that they can move out of poverty and into a strong middle class. You can work on investing in jobs and ensuring job creation in my state and in my community. You can raise the minimum wage. You can make education the great equalizer by providing formula-based funds to the public schools where they are needed most. You can make college affordable.

I still have hope. My hope is in the eyes of my students and my second grader. They still believe in the promise of America, and trust in education as the most powerful tool for advancement. But they cannot act alone. We give our power and our voice to you, as our elected officials. Please, speak – and act - on our behalf.

Thank you again for inviting me to be here today.

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<sup>1</sup> Krugman, P. (2014, January 29) *Hedgies Versus Teachers*. *NYTimes.com*. Retrieved February, 21, 2014, <http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com>.