

Obama escalates assault on public education

By Tom Eley
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On Friday, President Barack Obama announced an assault on public education that would go beyond the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" program. He outlined an education "reform" that would link teacher pay to the test performance of students and force state governments to shift funding from established public schools to so-called charter schools.

Obama spoke on Friday at the Department of Education, unveiling a \$4.3 billion "competition" among the states for federal grants, named "Race to the Top." Money from the fund would be awarded to only a handful of states that best promote "innovation"—charter schools and merit-based pay among teachers. States that forbid these policies, such as California, New York, and Wisconsin—home of the nation's highest-ranked education system—would be barred from consideration.

Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan presented the \$4.3 billion as if it were an extraordinary amount of money. But it is tens of billions less than has been doled out to individual banks, such as Goldman Sachs, in Obama's bailout of the finance industry. It is also less than the personal fortunes of about 90 Americans, according to the Forbes 400 list of 2008. Nor does it meet the desperate needs of cash-starved public education; the Detroit public school system alone has a deficit of \$400 million.

This relative pittance would do little even if it were distributed equitably. But that is not Obama's intention, as he made clear. "Rather than divvying it up and handing it out, we are letting states and districts compete for it," he said. "That's how we can incentivize excellence and spur reform and launch a race for the top in America's public schools."

Like a master dropping a bone among his starving dogs, the Obama administration is openly provoking a bitter competition among states and school districts for paltry funding.

Obama outlined three "strategies" for so-called underperforming schools, all of them reactionary. "One strategy involves replacing the principal, replacing much of the staff, and giving the school a second chance," he said. "Another strategy involves inviting a great nonprofit to help manage a troubled school. A third strategy involves converting a dropout factory into a successful charter school. These are public schools funded by parents, teachers, and civic or community organizations with broad leeway to innovate." The

second and third strategies—featuring "great nonprofit" groups and "community organizations"—indicate that Obama may see a role for religious groups in public education.

Duncan, speaking before Obama, said that Race to the Top would be used to encourage states and school districts to fire teachers. They "must be ready to institute far-reaching reforms, replace school staff, and change the school culture," he said. "We cannot continue to tinker in terrible schools where students fall further and further behind, year after year."

Duncan outlined three other funds, a collective \$4.8 billion, that will also be awarded only to those states and school districts "willing to turn around their lowest-performing schools," as Duncan put it.

Obama and Duncan implicitly laid the blame for the problems of public education at the feet of "bad" teachers.

While it is certainly the case that the US has among the worst public education systems in the industrialized nations—with high drop-out rates and poor accomplishment in key subject areas—this is not the fault of teachers. It is the outcome of decades in which public education has been starved of resources, while the wealth of the country has been channeled ever more openly into the coffers of the very rich.

Merit-based pay for teachers will only discourage educators from taking positions at disadvantaged schools and among students who need the most help. Its practical effect, like No Child Left Behind, will be to shift funding out of the schools that need it most. It is a giant step toward the privatization of public education in America and the formalization of a two-tier, class-based education system.

Already, the quality of education for American children depends largely on the affluence of the area in which any given school is located. Much of US school funding is based on property taxes and other forms of local revenue, and certain states make available far more money per student than others. In this set-up, the public schools in the wealthy neighborhoods and suburbs are vastly superior to those in the inner cities, small towns, reservations, and other financially starved areas. Rich and upper-middle class families may also bypass public education altogether by sending their children to expensive private or parochial schools. Obama's policies will serve to deepen, and make official, these disparities.

In an interview in the *Washington Post*, Obama claimed that evaluation tests could be crafted in such a way as to avert this.

Tests might be used to measure improvement, rather than comparing students in poor and rich schools, he said. Yet in a society in which social misery is mounting, where more and more children go to school homeless and hungry, a growing number of students will not show improvement on standardized tests—whose value, in any case, has been placed in doubt by countless pedagogues and teachers.

Make no mistake, Obama has proposed a class-based system of education. For the children of workers and the poor—who will not perform as well on standardized tests as the children of the rich—there will be financially starved schools and overworked and underpaid teachers. This will, of course, only worsen the education of the students, which will be reflected once again in worsening test scores. They and their teachers will pay the price through the reallocation of resources to the better-performing “charter” schools, which, like private schools, have no obligation to accept all students who might wish to enroll, and which routinely dispense with old union work rules and dismissal practices for teachers.

Obama has promoted time and again the example of the Chicago public schools, touting the record of Duncan, who was the system’s “chief executive officer” beginning in 2001. This should be taken as a threat. Duncan in fact decimated public education in Chicago, shuttering dozens of schools, carrying out massive layoffs among teachers and staff, and undermining tenure. The results? In 2008, only 55 percent of Chicago high school students managed to graduate. Another telling statistic is 26, the number of Chicago students murdered in 2008, mostly as a result of finding themselves in hostile gang territory great distances from the old schools Duncan had axed.

The assault on school teachers and public education is another front in the Obama administration’s ruthless class war on the living standards, social position and democratic rights of the working class that is already deeper and more sweeping than that of the Reagan administration and its successors. So far, Obama’s education proposals have received less media attention than his bailout of Wall Street, his forced bankruptcy of the auto industry, and his so-called health care “reform” which is in fact an effort to create an openly class-based health care system. But his proposals for education will prove just as costly to workers and their children.

He has encountered no resistance from the teachers unions, who have for years denounced incentive-based pay and charter school proposals from the Bush administration and Republican governors, and have handed over tens of millions to elect Democratic candidates, including Obama.

“This is poking teachers’ unions straight in the eye,” Mike Petrilli, of the education policy group the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, told the *New York Times*.

Not judging by the reaction of the unions. The two biggest teachers unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have mounted no resistance to Obama’s plans and quickly endorsed them after

their formal announcement.

AFT President Randi Weingarten declared, “The era of teacher union-bashing was over today,” and NEA President Dennis Van Roekel said that Obama and Duncan “want to work with us, and not do things to us.”

Their speedy capitulation to Obama demonstrates the essence of the union executives’ earlier “opposition” to Bush. They are contented by the fact they have “a seat at the table” in the dismantling of public education. This, they sense, can be converted into revenue streams, perks, and think-tank positions for them and their colleagues. They have no interest in defending the wages and security of the teachers they purport to represent, much less public education as a whole.

Obama’s education proposals demonstrate that social inequality in America is so advanced, and the power of the financial aristocracy so immense, that no public service or program, including education, that is not openly based on class privilege and status can long survive.

The ideal of an egalitarian public education system has historically been a central component of the democratic impulse in the US. From the early 19th century, the more farsighted of the US political and business elite recognized the value of a system of free public schools. The great advocate of this perspective was the Massachusetts educator Horace Mann (1796-1859), who called education “the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery” and “our political safety” without which “all is deluge.”

And every social movement for equality has inscribed on its banner the demand for equal education. Again and again, historians find that a central driving force behind the great labor struggles of the late 19th century and first half of the 20th century was workers’ desire that their children might aspire to a fuller and richer life through education; that their children would not be forced to work from a young age. Indeed, workers were prepared to abide by certain deprivations, so long as they felt their children might live better one day.

In the wake of the Civil War, contemporaries spoke of an unquenchable thirst among the freed slaves for education that had been denied them. It is little accident that the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s took aim first at the “separate but equal” doctrine of racial segregation in the Southern public school system that had condemned African Americans to inferior schools.

Now the Obama administration is promoting education “reform” that will deepen a new system of segregation in education—along class rather than racial lines.

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