

Obama issues hypocritical criticism of standardized testing in US schools

By Jerry White
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Over the last several days, President Obama and his outgoing education secretary, Arne Duncan, have raised mild criticism of the relentless testing regime in America's public schools. Well aware of the popular hostility towards standardized tests, the two administration officials more identified with their proliferation have suddenly discovered that over-testing can "take valuable time away from teaching and learning, draining creative approaches from our classrooms."

While the obsession with standardized tests began with former President Bush's No Child Left Behind policy in 2002, the Obama administration has vastly expanded standardized testing as part of its corporate-backed "school reform" agenda, which has closed hundreds of public schools and diverted resources to for-profit charter operations.

Under Obama's Race to the Top program, cash-strapped school districts competing for federal funding must meet several criteria set by the administration, including increasing the use of standardized tests to close so-called "failing schools" and convert them into charters. These tests have been used to scapegoat and fire teachers, in the name of "accountability," for educational problems stemming from the high levels of poverty among school children and the impact of decades of budget cutting and teacher layoffs.

The continued focus on testing is included in Obama's Common Core State Standards scheme.

In a Facebook video posted by the White House over the weekend, Obama acknowledged widespread opposition to testing without mentioning his administration's responsibility. "In letters, emails and conversations around the country, I've heard from parents who worry that too much testing is keeping

their kids from learning some of life's most important lessons. I've heard from teachers who feel so much pressure to teach to a test that it takes the joy out of teaching and learning, both for them and for the students. I want to fix that."

The president cited a recent survey conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools, which is made up of the nation's largest urban public school systems. The study found that the average student in some school systems is taking 112 standardized tests before high school graduation. He did not cite the portion of the report that noted, "In the 2014-15 school year, students in the 66 urban school districts sat for tests more than 6,570 times," most of which were "administered to fulfill federal requirements under No Child Left Behind, NCLB waivers, or Race to the Top (RTT), while many others originate at the state and local levels."

Nevertheless, Obama says "in moderation, smart, strategic tests" are needed because "I want to hold all of us accountable for making sure every child, everywhere, is learning what he or she needs to be successful." The reference to "hold us accountable" means continuing punitive testing schemes to punish teachers, not hold the administration accountable for its destructive policies, including starving the public schools of funding.

In any case, the administration's "Testing Action Plan," released on October 24, offers nothing more than meaningless recommendations for school districts to limit the amount of time dedicated to testing and test-preparation. "While it is up to states and districts how to balance instructional time and the need for high-quality assessments," the plan states, "we recommend that states place a cap on the percentage of instructional time students spend taking required

statewide standardized assessments to ensure that no child spends more than 2 percent of her classroom time taking these tests.”

In the event that a school exceeds this cap, “parents should receive formal notification” and “an action plan should be publicly posted to describe the steps the state will take to review and eliminate unnecessary assessments, and come into compliance.” It goes without saying that the administration will not withhold federal funding for any districts in non-compliance.

There is no legislative mandate to reduce testing. In fact, the destructive policy is contained in both the Senate and House versions of a bill to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which is expected to be signed by the president by the end of the year.

As one critic of the proposal noted, eighth-grade students in the US already exceed the White House’s proposed limit of 2 percent of instruction time per year just on testing, to say nothing of the time spent teaching to the tests.

Buried in the fact sheet released by the Education Department is throwaway sentence, “The administration bears some of the responsibility for this, and we are committed to being part of the solution.”

On Monday, Obama, Duncan and the nominee to replace him, John King, met with teacher union officials and others in the Oval Office. Asked by NBC News whether all the tests were improving learning, Duncan said, “Was every single test improving learning? No. They weren’t.” He added, “that's why it’s important to stop, to take a step back and really figure out—is it truly driving instruction in the classroom. Is it truly helping teachers be more successful and students know what their strengths and weaknesses are and build upon them?”

For Duncan to ask such questions is like an arsonist asking whether burning down a building and killing all of its inhabitants was helpful for checking its structural soundness. In 2009, the newly-appointed education secretary told a crowd of education researchers, “I am a deep believer in the power of data to drive our decisions. Data gives us the roadmap to reform. It tells us where we are, where we need to go, and who is most at risk.”

Obama picked Duncan because he had long been the “CEO” of the Chicago Public Schools and a champion

of “reform” policies that undermined public education and funneled public money to private corporations.

Across the nation, standardized tests come from one of three companies: CTB McGraw Hill, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and Pearson. These corporations write the tests, grade the tests, and publish the books that students use to prepare for the tests. Houghton Mifflin has a 38 percent market share, according to its press materials. In 2013, the company brought in \$1.38 billion in revenue.

The Obama administration and state and local Democrats and Republicans have used standardized testing to discredit and destroy public education and justify its increasing privatization. In the process, both big business parties have wiped out hundreds of thousands of teaching jobs, slashed the wages, health and pension benefits of school employees and increasingly transformed the teaching profession into casualized, low-paid labor.

Predictably, Randi Weingarten, the president of the 1.6 million-member American Federation of Teachers, hailed Obama’s phony posturing. “I thought that was a very big deal. The president has clearly said we need to stop over-testing and stop testing misuse, and now the devil's going to be in the details in terms of making that real... People are going to be very, very skeptical, but I think that it changes the climate, and that’s really important,” Weingarten said.

The AFT and its counter-part, the National Education Association, are not opposed to the reactionary attack on public education. On the contrary, they have only sought to be partners in the dismantling of public education, in order to get their own share of the spoils of the multi-trillion dollar “education business.” The main slogan of the Weingarten’s AFT is “school reform with us, not against us.”

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