

Bush budget plan attacks public education

Last of five articles on Bush's 2004 budget proposal

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This is the final part in a series of five articles on the social implications and political significance of the Bush administration's fiscal 2004 budget plan. Part one, "The Bush budget: blueprint for a right-wing assault on the working class", was posted on February 11. Part two, "Welfare for the wealthy: the Bush tax plan", was posted on February 12. Part three, "Bush budget targets the poor", was posted on February 13. Part four, "The Bush budget: subverting Medicare and Medicaid", was posted on February 14.

As a candidate and now as president, George W. Bush has sought to identify himself as an advocate of improved education, despite the fact that there is no basis for it in his record as governor of Texas. On the contrary, the Bush administration has combined pro-education rhetoric with the most deliberate effort to undermine the public schools since the public education system was first established in the nineteenth century.

Last year Bush joined forces with congressional Democrats like Senator Edward Kennedy to push through the No Child Left Behind Act, a piece of legislation that lent "liberal" credibility to Bush's lip service to education. The bill imposed sweeping testing requirements on school children, while offering the promise of increased funding for so-called failing schools. The actual spending on education in the 2003 budget and the amount proposed in 2004 give the lie to this posturing.

The Bush administration requested \$5 billion less in education spending for the current year than was authorized by the No Child Left Behind Act. In a series of votes in early January, the US Senate beat back amendments that would have restored full funding.

In the fiscal 2004 budget, the gap between authorization and appropriation is even larger: the White House has requested \$6 billion less than

proposed in the legislation. The proposed budget is actually \$100 million lower than for 2003, despite the increase in the number of school children and the growing financial burdens on public education. There is a \$1 billion increase in special education funding, but this comes at the expense of other school programs, with \$1.5 billion cut through the elimination of 45 separate programs, including rural education, dropout prevention and physical education.

The combination of rigid federal testing standards and limited resources has created a deepening crisis for the public schools, which are compelled by law to meet official test goals or lose eligibility for federal funds, and possibly be closed down entirely. January 31 was the deadline for state school officials to submit plans for implementing the federal law, and most states have said that a majority of their public schools may be classified as "failing."

The No Child Left Behind Act classifies as "low-performing" any school that does not show year-to-year improvement in test scores for each of five racial and ethnic groups, as well as for low-income students, those with limited English fluency, and the learning disabled. Schools that do not show improvement for two consecutive years are classified as "failing." They are required to allow students to transfer to other schools, hire tutors, or face state takeover and closure, with the dismissal of principals and teachers.

The unstated political goal of the White House is to discredit public education through the imposition of arbitrary standards—in a process that belies Republican claims to support local decision-making against federal mandates—and promote private schools as an alternative. One Kentucky state school official, who resigned in protest over the impact of the law, called it "a cynical attempt by the Bush administration to build

in failure and use that as an argument for vouchers.”

In the only place in the United States where the federal government directly controls public education, Washington DC, the Bush administration budget proposes a pilot school voucher program, despite adamant opposition from local school officials and a local referendum vote of 90 percent against vouchers for private or religious schools. The DC voucher plan is part of a larger effort, backed by \$756 million in federal funds, to promote so-called “school choice” programs.

Another significant cutback in public education is a measure incorporated into the 2004 budget to stop compensating school districts with large populations of school children whose parents work at military bases or other federal installations. This program, called impact aid, provides money for 1,300 school districts that lack resources because local property taxes, the principal source of school funding, do not apply to federal workplaces.

Impact aid would still be provided for school children actually living on military bases, but not for those whose parents live off-base. This amounts to a cut of 60 percent in total funding, since there are 142,000 children living on bases compared to 240,000 children of military personnel living off-base.

The result is that many school districts will be hit by huge cuts in prospective federal funding for children whose parents have just been mobilized for the war in Iraq. A district adjacent to the Fort Hood army base in Texas will lose \$9.5 million, 20 percent of its operating budget. The Bellevue Public School District near Nebraska’s Offutt Air Force Base will lose \$7 million, nearly \$1,000 for each student.

Further cuts in federal aid to education could result from the implementation of Bush’s “faith-based initiative,” which is aimed at the unconstitutional promotion of religion by the federal government. The Department of Education announced last week that schools which do not allow students to pray outside the classroom or allow teachers to hold religious meetings on school property could lose federal funding.

One of the cruelest measures announced by the Bush administration last month is a plan to impose testing requirements on the popular Head Start program, which currently serves 908,000 preschool children, preparing them to enter kindergarten. The annual assessments, to be called National Reporting on Child Outcomes,

amounts to extending high-stakes testing methods from the public schools to four-year-olds.

Bush announced last year that he wanted to shift Head Start’s focus from nurturing social and emotional development to early literacy. This would require what one official called a “battery” of new testing instruments, which could lead to the decertification of those programs that fall short of federal standards, which have not yet been set.

The official likened the testing of four-year-olds to “quality assurance” programs in industrial settings. “What we are bringing to Head Start is not different from what you encounter when you go to buy a car,” he said.

The 2004 budget document also proposes that states be given the option to take over the administration of the program from the federal government, including setting teacher qualifications and deciding instructional programs, in return for limits on federal funding. Head Start is also to be transferred from the Department of Health and Human Services to the Department of Education.

Wade Horn, assistant secretary of Health and Human Services, sought to deny the obvious. He said, “This is not dumping Head Start on the states at a time when they’re having budget difficulties.” In fact, it is precisely that.



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