

Obama scapegoats teachers, continues Bush education policies

Tom Eley
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In an address before the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on Tuesday, President Barack Obama indicated that he would continue the essential features of the educational policy of his predecessor, George Bush.

Obama said his goal was "to finally make No Child Left Behind live up to its name by ensuring not only that teachers and principals get the funding they need, but that the money is tied to results." To achieve this, Obama emphasized an increasing rigidity for standardized testing of students, and the linking of both pay for teachers and educational funding to these test results. Just as Bush had done, Obama claimed that such "performance incentives" will improve the delivery of education to students.

Nothing could be further from the truth. As abundant experience with No Child Left Behind has made clear, linking school funding and teacher pay to student performance on standardized exams—tests whose pedagogical value is dubious at best—undermines those working class and minority school districts that are in need of the most assistance.

Among several other rightwing reforms he enunciated in his speech, Obama called on state legislatures to lift quotas on the formation of "charter schools"—publicly funded institutions that compete with the preexisting public schools for students and resources. In Chicago—where Obama's secretary of education, Arne Duncan, worked as the school system's "Chief Executive Officer"—the advance of the charter school has led to the closure of numerous "low-performing" schools in poor neighborhoods.

The speech was notable for Obama's scapegoating of teachers for the failures of the American educational system. Obama said that improvement in education

requires "states and school districts taking steps to move bad teachers out of the classroom."

This will require an attack on the workplace rules and seniority system that have long governed teaching. "Let me be clear," he continued, "if a teacher is given a chance but still does not improve, there is no excuse for that person to continue teaching. I reject a system that rewards failure and protects a person from its consequences." While he finds the "courage" to bully public school teachers, Obama has no difficulty in rewarding the failure of the financial executives who have triggered the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression.

No doubt hundreds of thousands of teachers voted for Obama in the hope that he would reverse Bush's disastrous educational policies. In his speech, Obama went out of his way to slap these teachers in the face, noting that "many supporters of my party have resisted the idea of rewarding excellence in teaching with extra pay, even though we know it can make a difference in the classroom."

The major teachers' unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) spent millions of dollars on behalf of Obama and the Democrats, falsely promising their members Obama would be a true ally of public education in the White House. Now the teachers' unions will fall in line behind the same policies that, when used by the Bush administration, they denounced.

At the time of the publication, the AFT and NEA had yet to comment on Obama's speech on their web sites. The president of the AFT, Randi Weingarten, quoted in the *Washington Post*, welcomed Obama's proposals, commenting only that "the devil is in the details."

As for funding education, Obama offered nothing new. Where he discussed specific allocations, these

were already tied to his stimulus package that passed Congress last month. Like the stimulus as a whole, Obama's funding for the nation's educational requirements doesn't begin to address the level of need.

Obama pointed out that his stimulus bill will provide \$5 billion in new funding for early childhood education programs including Head Start, which he said would provide 150,000 more children with child care. The US spends more than twice as much in Iraq on a monthly basis.

For higher education, Obama boasted of modest expansions to college Pell Grants and tax credits of \$2,500 for low-income families to send their children to college. Given the level of the crisis confronting higher education, Obama's reforms are a drop in the ocean. State governments have savaged college budgets, while private endowments have collapsed. Colleges, in turn, have pushed the costs onto students through tuition hikes. All of this under conditions where layoffs are mounting and household wealth is rapidly declining, undermining parents' ability to pay their children's tuition.

As for kindergarten-through-twelfth-grade education, Obama briefly noted the crisis confronting inner city schools. "Stemming the tide of dropouts will require turning around our low-performing schools. Just 2,000 high schools in cities like Detroit, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia produce over 50 percent of America's dropouts," he said. But he offered no concrete proposals, much less money, to these poverty-stricken districts, which have been devastated by the economic crisis. Instead, they got a homily: "I am issuing a challenge to educators and lawmakers, parents and teachers alike—let us all make turning around our schools our collective responsibility as Americans."

Obama's stimulus claims to allocate \$81.1 billion for all education-related funding projects, a fraction of the funds doled out to the biggest banks in the \$750 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP).

It was an ugly little speech, saturated with jingoism, free market boosterism, and moral hectoring. Obama offered not so much as a nod to the classical, universalistic, understanding of education—the cultivation of young minds in the arts and sciences toward a fuller, richer life in the service of society and humanity as a whole.

Instead for Obama, "the future belongs to the nation

that best educates its citizens." The purpose of education is to prepare a new generation of hyper-exploited, but patriotic, workers. According to Obama, the educational system needs "to prepare every child, everywhere in America, to out-compete any worker, anywhere in the world."

"This is an area where we are being outpaced by other nations," Obama added. "I refuse to accept that America's children cannot rise to this challenge." He explained that the US will be "outpaced" unless it spends "less time teaching things that don't matter."

Since elsewhere in his remarks Obama emphasized math, science and "skills," the aim of this comment was clear enough: the humanities—art, music, literature, and history—"don't matter" in the competition with other nations. Indeed, by developing critical, cultured human beings, the arts tend to cut against the wretched labor competition Obama champions.

Obama placed the blame for deficiencies in the educational system not on inequality, but on teachers, students, and parents. In this vein his speech was full of absurd moral "challenges," among them: "America cannot succeed unless our students take responsibility for their own education"; "It is time to start rewarding good teachers and stop making excuses for bad ones"; "The bottom line is that no government policies will make any difference unless we also hold ourselves more accountable as parents."

While Obama's remarks on "responsibility" sounded like hollow sermonizing—for example, he advised parents to turn the televisions off and for students to pay attention in class—they were also menacing.

Obama directed comments to students that equated dropping out of school with treason. "[T]o any student who's watching, I say this: don't even think about dropping out of school," he said. "[D]ropping out is quitting on yourself, it's quitting on your country, and it is not an option—not anymore."



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