

# Obama's public education race to the bottom

**Tom Eley****21 November 2009**

Recent days have seen an unlikely threesome promoting the Obama administration's "Race to the Top" public schools initiative. Education Secretary Arne Duncan has joined with Al Sharpton and former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich to tour the country in support of the plan.

The basic idea is to force state governments to compete for \$4.35 billion in federal assistance, with the money going to those states which do the most to promote charter schools, utilize standardized testing, and weaken workplace rules for teachers. Essentially, the scheme sets up a bidding war among the states for desperately needed funds on the basis of an anti-public education agenda that has been promoted for decades by the right wing.

Pairing the Democratic Party demagogue Sharpton with Gingrich is aimed at suggesting that a broad coalition has formed behind Obama's education agenda.

Sharpton's role is to defuse opposition in largely African-American urban schools that will be particularly devastated by Obama's policies. Citing the "achievement gap" that remains between black and white students, Sharpton now champions the same policies he opposed when they were put forward by the Bush administration.

The teachers unions are also on board. The American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association now support essentially the same policies they opposed under the previous administration. The difference is that they were shut out of education "reform" by the Bush administration, while Obama and the Democrats are eager to utilize their services in attacking teachers and undermining the foundations of public education.

Further underscoring the true nature of the "reforms" being put in place is the support offered by Gingrich, a diehard opponent of government social programs and partisan of school privatization.

As for Obama's education secretary, while CEO of the

Chicago public education system Duncan forced the shutdown of dozens of schools, the tearing up of rules for teachers relating to seniority and academic freedom, and the creation of a wave of charter schools, including military-style academies.

What are the results of Duncan's years in Chicago? The graduation rate from the city's high schools is little better than 50 percent, and dozens of high schoolers have been killed, many as a result of traversing hostile gang territory en route to distant schools, their neighborhood schools having been closed.

Presented by Duncan as an enormous amount of money, the \$4.35 billion fund is a tiny fraction of Obama's outlays for the military and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and about 2 hundredths of 1 percent of the \$23 trillion Washington has made available to the finance industry. The grand total allotted for education is less than the individual personal fortunes of about 60 Americans, and a fraction of the Christmas bonuses that Wall Street will pay its executives and traders next month.

By 2011, the combined state-level funding gap for schools will be \$20 billion. This does not include local revenue shortfalls, much of it resulting from collapsing real estate tax assessments. Scores of school districts will be bankrupt by the end of the year. The state of Hawaii has gone so far as to cut the school week to four days.

Only a handful of states will receive any "Race to the Top" money, possibly fewer than 15, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. "This is going to be highly competitive, and there are going to be a lot more losers than winners," Duncan bluntly declared in announcing the 30-plus criteria that will be used to judge the states.

These blackmail tactics are already having the desired effect. A number of states have in recent months passed legislation promoting charter schools, expanding testing and other metrics, and channeling funding to those

schools whose students perform well. These policies will starve the very schools that need funding the most.

Obama's policies encourage the development of an openly class-based system of education. Wealthy districts will prosper, while the great majority of schools—in the cities, rural areas and even the suburbs—will suffer or vanish.

Many teachers, students and parents oppose Obama's education policies. After Duncan outlined the plan in July, "1,200 public comments poured into the Department of Education" condemning the plan, the *New York Times* noted.

The Obama administration responded with its usual contempt for popular opinion. "Even after all the comments, the rules are as comprehensive and demanding as before, they haven't changed," said Rahm Emanuel, the president's chief of staff. "We're seeking reforms, so we haven't backed off anything."

As it becomes clear what Obama's education policies mean and as the public school system continues to collapse, teachers, students and parents will move to defend public education, which has for nearly two centuries been bound up with egalitarian and democratic principles.

This opposition will require an independent political perspective, in opposition to both parties of big business and based on a socialist program.

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