

Obama budget threatens funding for poor school districts

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The Obama administration's budget proposal for 2011 contains sweeping changes to funding for primary and secondary education. New rules would radically alter the guidelines for the distribution of funding to schools with high concentrations of low-income students, punishing students and teachers in these schools for failure to meet "college- or career-readiness" goals.

Obama will ask Congress for \$49.7 billion in discretionary spending for the 2011 fiscal year for the Department of Education (DOE), a modest \$3.5 billion or 7.5 percent increase over 2010. To put this into perspective, Obama's request for spending in 2011 for the Department of Defense is \$708.2 billion.

How the DOE will allocate its funds is also of critical importance. While details of the education proposal remain sketchy, the changes being pushed by Obama to what is known as Title I funding are to the right of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001—the law that is widely recognized by teachers and parents as an attack on education, particularly in poorer school districts.

NCLB is the latest reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESAE), a federal statute enacted in 1965 that authorized and funded school development and resources and promoted parental involvement.

Under Title I of the act, the US Department of Education established a set of programs to distribute funding to schools and school districts with a high percentage of students from low-income families. To qualify, a school typically must have around 40 percent or more of its students coming from families with incomes falling below the federal poverty level, or about \$22,000 annually for a family of four.

Under Obama's proposals, a significant portion of these Title I funds would be distributed to poorer districts—not on the basis of economic need, but according to their

"performance." This would in effect penalize students and teachers in schools already operating with budgets funded by lower tax bases, and where increasing numbers of families are struggling under the growing impact of the economic crisis.

The change is modeled on Obama's Race to the Top (RTTT) program, which is forcing states to compete for \$4.3 billion in stimulus funds. Under RTTT, states that prohibit the use of test scores in teacher evaluations are ineligible for funds. States are also rewarded for opening up more charter schools, institutions that are privately run but receive federal money at the expense of public schools.

In line with Obama's RTTT, the governing body of the New York City's Department of Education voted last month to close 7 middle or elementary schools and 12 high schools. More than 10,000 students, the vast majority from poor and working-class communities, will be affected by the closures. This scenario will be repeated in communities across the country in the coming months.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan gave an indication of what the changes to Title I funding would mean in remarks at the Brookings Institution in Washington last May. He said, "When a school is chronically under-performing despite additional supports and other strategies, you have to consider bolder action, whether it's changing the leadership, hiring a new staff or turning schools over to charter operators."

In other words, "under-performing" schools could see funds withdrawn, and teacher and administrator firings; or they could be handed over to for-profit charter operators or shut down outright. Districts that reject evaluation and payment of teachers based on student performance—so-called merit pay—would be similarly penalized.

In much the same way as the Clinton administration gutted the welfare system, poor students in poor districts would no longer be "entitled" to Title I money, but would

be forced to compete for the funds along with other equally cash-strapped schools. This is a fundamental and regressive change to a system of school funding that has been in place for four-and-a-half decades.

The *New York Times* quoted Jack Jones, president of the Center on Education Policy, who attended a recent media event where the Obama administration outlined its proposals. “They want to recast the law so that it is as close to Race to the Top as they can get it, making the money conditional on districts’ taking action to improve schools,” he said.

“Right now most federal money goes out in formulas, so schools know how much they’ll get, and then use it to provide services for poor children,” Jones added. “The department thinks that’s become too much of an entitlement. They want to upend that scheme by making states and districts pledge to take actions the administration considers reform, before they get the money.”

As in other areas of social spending, Obama is overseeing in education the dismantling of a vital public program for working families. While trillions of dollars have been allocated to bail out Wall Street and the banks, no such bailout is available for the public schools. School districts throughout the country, facing unprecedented budget crises, are responding with teacher layoffs, the closing down of schools, and the elimination of programs such as art, music and physical education.

The Obama administration contends it is seeking to move away from the Bush administration’s emphasis on math and reading in NCLB—and the consequent “teaching to the test” imposed on teachers—to focus more on college preparedness. But under conditions where school districts, particularly poorer ones, will be forced to compete for inadequate resources, the end result will be an overall dumbing down of public education.

Additionally, the stress placed on graduating students who are “career-ready” makes clear that the political establishment does not view affordable, high-quality college education as an opportunity that should be available to all young people. Rather, in working class and poorer districts, high schools should be geared towards producing workers for low-wage jobs.

In opposition to the interests of their own membership, teachers unions have been complicit in imposing the bipartisan attack on public education.

Last December, the Detroit Federation of Teachers union forced through a concessions contract with a concerted campaign of intimidation and threats directed

against teachers. The DFT worked closely with the school district, the media, and the Democratic Party at both the local and national level.

Included in the rotten deal was a “Termination Incentive Plan,” proposed by DFT leaders, which amounts to a \$10,000 pay cut for full-time teachers over two years at a rate of \$500 a month. The plan was presented as a loan that the DFT claims will be returned when teachers retire or are laid off. In reality, it is aimed at compelling older, more senior teachers to leave their jobs, allowing the district to hire new teachers at lower pay and with no rights.

Other concessions in the pact include cuts to health benefits, a pay freeze and the imposition of “peer review” and merit pay. In line with a bill passed by the Michigan state legislature, the contract also opens the way for the expansion of “priority schools”—i.e., charter schools.

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* in an effort to browbeat DFT members into accepting the contract. She argued that it was better for teachers to accept the attacks on wages, benefits and rights with the help of the unions, instead of in opposition to the union bureaucrats.

In a speech January 12 at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., Weingarten called on union members and school district management to collaborate in imposing such contracts on teachers, along with “accountability” schemes like merit pay.

According to the AFT web site’s report on the Weingarten speech, the AFT president “singled out several school districts that have made positive changes because of their trusting and respectful labor-management relationships, including in New Haven, Connecticut; St. Paul, Minnesota; and Detroit.”



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