

Obama education plan to push competitive funding

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President Obama released plans Saturday to overhaul the No Child Left Behind law, embracing the main thrust of the right-wing education plan adopted under the Bush administration, while proposing modifications that would in many cases make even greater inroads into the principle of universal, high-quality public education.

Most significantly, the administration plan would change the funding mechanism established in the bedrock Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), one of the last major progressive reforms enacted in the United States, substituting grants awarded on a competitive basis for a formula that awarded funding largely based on population.

While overall federal aid to schools would increase by 16 percent, to \$29 billion, many low-performing schools in impoverished areas would face the loss of much of their federal funding if they fail to meet required benchmarks.

This approach builds on the “success”—from the standpoint of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan—of the \$5 billion in competitive grants being awarded under the “Race to the Top” program. Hundreds of school districts bid for the grants, which reward actions like the recent mass firing of teachers in Central Falls, Rhode Island, who were penalized for the poor test and graduation performance of students in the state’s poorest school district.

State governments are using Race to the Top as a pretext for wholesale attacks on job security and wages. In Florida, for example, the Republican-controlled state government is pushing for the adoption of a new state law, SB 6, that would require new teachers to take five-year probationary contracts, followed by a series of one-year contracts, meaning that teachers could face firing every school year. The law would also exclude salary

from collective bargaining, with all salary determinations made by the state.

No Child Left Behind amended ESEA by favoring charter schools and other forms of privatization, and mandating a regimen of testing that has made it increasingly difficult for public school teachers to provide a well-rounded education for their students, rather than “teaching to the test” to insure that students meet the arbitrary benchmarks set by the law.

This program has become so discredited among teachers and other education professionals that Education Secretary Duncan said the name No Child Left Behind would be scrapped, due to its association with rigid testing and harsh penalties on schools that fail to reach benchmarks. While there will be a new name, however, the basic regime will continue.

Obama proposes to continue the annual testing in math and reading, one of the principal complaints by teachers, students and parents, but to change the way the scores are used, so that year-to-year progress would be treated favorably, even if the progress did not result in students passing at grade level.

Many of the details of the proposal are unclear or subject to change. The administration has briefed education reporters, governors and school officials on a 41-page draft of the program that will be sent to Congress and released publicly on Monday, but replacement or amendment of No Child Left Behind will require legislative action, whose outcome is uncertain.

One significant change was to abandon the goal of 100 percent student proficiency in math and reading by 2014, which was used by President George W. Bush and the late Senator Edward Kennedy to give a reformist gloss to the bipartisan agreement that produced the 2002 law. There will be no goal of 100

percent proficiency—which amounts to an admission that many millions of working class youth will be condemned to functional illiteracy and innumeracy.

Instead, the Obama plan offers a deadline of 2020—four years after Obama would leave office if elected to a second term—for all graduating high school students to achieve “college or career readiness.” This has a clear class significance: the children of the privileged layers will go to college, while large numbers of working class youth, without basic literacy and math skills, will be slotted into “careers” that would be nothing but an endless series of low-wage, unstable jobs.

In his Saturday radio and Internet address, Obama painted the education initiative in rosy colors, declaring his determination to provide educational opportunity for all children. But he couched his argument in terms of economic nationalism, warning, “Our competitors understand that the nation that out-educates us today will out-compete us tomorrow.”

He claimed that the new education plan would provide rewards for progress rather than punitive treatment for schools that are failing, but there is plenty of punishment according to press accounts of the program.

The 70,000 public schools in the United States would be ranked in broad categories, with the bottom 5 percent required to choose among these alternatives: shutting down, replacing at least half their staff, firing the principal, or conversion to “independent management,” i.e., privatized as charter schools.

Schools in the next-lowest 5 percent would be placed on warning and threatened with similar action if they do not improve. Both groups of schools would fail to qualify for the additional funds offered under Race to the Top and its long-term successor program, ensuring that they were denied the resources needed for improvement.

Another 5 percent of schools, those with the widest achievement gaps between racial and ethnic groups, would be required to narrow those disparities. This provision is a sop thrown to black and Hispanic lobbies in the Democratic Party, and would instigate conflicts within school systems along racial lines.

Democratic and Republican politicians generally welcomed the outline of the education plan. Liberal California Democrat George Miller, chairman of the

House Education and Labor Committee, declared, “This blueprint lays the right markers to help us reset the bar for our students and the nation.” Conservative Republican Governor Sonny Perdue of Georgia issued a statement Friday praising Duncan, saying, “The governor is very supportive of the direction the secretary is going.”

The two teachers unions issued statements largely critical of the Obama plan—they had no choice, given the overwhelming hostility of rank-and-file teachers to No Child Left Behind—while making clear their role as slavish supporters of the administration and the Democratic Party.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said she was “surprised and disappointed that the Obama administration proposed this as a starting point for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.” She added, “despite some promising rhetoric, this blueprint places 100 percent of the responsibility on teachers and gives them zero percent authority.”

Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association, said, “What excited educators about President Obama’s hopes and vision for education on the campaign trail has not made its way into this blueprint.” The new plan, he said, “still relies on standardized tests to identify winners and losers.”

Rank-and-file teachers who posted comments on a union blog were angered by the Obama plan. One teacher wrote, “I am disappointed that we, as a union, are merely ‘disappointed’ with the president and Arne Duncan. We should be OUTRAGED.”

Another asked, “What do you think would happen to your country’s education system if the largest teachers’ union had a strike for one day to make sure what we are saying is heard? I bet parents and politicians would listen! Is there anyone in up there in NEA who is brave enough ...?”



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