

# Obama administration, media intensify campaign to hold teachers “accountable”

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Over the past weeks, the Obama administration, with the full-throated support of the corporate media, has launched a campaign against public school teachers, blaming them for the failure of the US education system.

This propaganda campaign has as its principal objectives the justification of mass layoffs of teachers, various privatization schemes, and broad cuts in spending cloaked by “incentives” as part of the so-called “Race to the Top” program.

The Obama administration, having squandered trillions on war and Wall Street bailouts, is determined that the working class should pay for the economic crisis, including by reductions in public education.

Spearheading the campaign is Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the former “CEO” of the Chicago Public Schools and an alumnus of the Chicago Democratic Party machine. Earlier this week, Duncan was dispatched on a four-state “Courage in the Classroom” tour, during which he congratulated those states that had most slavishly instituted the regressive “reforms” demanded by the Obama administration.

Meanwhile, Duncan continued to call for “accountability” and “transparency” for teachers. According to Duncan, the failure of the US education system is to be blamed not on decades of budget cuts and mismanagement but on poorly performing teachers.

Duncan expressly supported the recent publication by the *Los Angeles Times* of teacher “value-added rankings,” including the names of teachers, based on the performance of students on standardized tests. “I

am a strong advocate for transparency,” said Duncan. “Let’s put out data on dropouts, college enrollment, college completion, loan default rates, and every other kind of data that can help us highlight our remarkable success and help us better understand why too many of our children are unprepared.”

Duncan oversees the so-called “Race to the Top” program initiated by the Obama administration. The program offers various bribes and incentives for states to impose education “reforms” demanded by the Obama administration, such as privatizing education by expanding charter schools. The states themselves—already desperate for funds—are required to compete among each other for the meager federal funds.

The states that meet the reactionary demands of Duncan and the Obama administration are entitled to a share of the paltry \$4 billion in “Race to the Top” money. By way of comparison, the total cost of the Wall Street bailouts has been estimated at \$23 trillion, or more than 5,700 times as much.

On August 24, the Obama administration indicated that the District of Columbia and 13 states had qualified thus far for the program, including Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Tennessee. Conspicuously absent from the list are California and Michigan, where conditions at schools are especially desperate.

The demands for expanded charter schools and for linking funding to student performance on standardized tests were formerly raised by Republicans and

incorporated into the notorious “No Child Left Behind” program of George W. Bush. One striking indication of the rightward trajectory of the US political establishment is that the Obama administration has incorporated those same demands into its own aggressive education “reform” program. Chester Finn, assistant secretary of Education under Ronald Reagan, told csmonitor.com that Republicans are “speechless ... there’s nothing they want to argue with [Duncan] about.”

Particularly shameful has been the role of the US media over the past week in attacking teachers and promoting the Obama education “reform” programs. There is every reason to believe that top executives in the major media corporations have been coordinating their efforts with the Obama administration. Leading the pack is the *Los Angeles Times*, which recently launched a major “Grading the Teachers” special report, featuring daily attacks on teachers. Numerous other outlets followed suit: CNN launched a “Fix our Schools” program, while ABC launched “Crisis in the Classroom.”

This week, the *Los Angeles Times* provocatively released data on 6,000 individual teachers, complete with “value-added” rankings according to student performance on standardized tests. Duncan, for his part, encouraged the publication of this data by other newspapers around the country.

The use of “value-added” terminology is part of the attempt to impose corporate profit principles onto public education.

One Los Angeles teacher likened the “rankings” in the *Los Angeles Times* to being forced to wear a “scarlet letter.” Many teachers have observed that the rankings produced by comparing student test scores bear little relationship to the skill of the teacher. Multiple-choice standardized tests examine a narrow spectrum of skills such as math, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Critical thinking, writing, creativity, historical and cultural awareness, and artistic ability are entirely ignored. One teacher observed that a teacher might inadvertently lower his or her “ranking” by allowing struggling students to transfer into his or her

class, as many excellent teachers do.

The Obama administration’s campaign against teachers began with a speech Obama himself gave on July 29 in which he called for “some measure of accountability” for teachers. Obama declared that “even as we applaud teachers for their hard work, we’ve got to make sure we’re seeing results in the classroom. If we’re not seeing results in the classroom, then let’s work with teachers to help them become more effective.”

“If that doesn’t work,” Obama added menacingly, “let’s find the right teacher for that classroom.”

The calls for “accountability” from the Obama administration are utter hypocrisy and should be rejected with contempt. Under Obama, there is no “accountability” for those politicians who enacted budget cuts that devastated public education and social programs.

There is no “accountability” for top generals and politicians who authorized and organized war crimes and torture. There is no “accountability” for top CEOs, bankers, investors, and financiers whose reckless drive for profit vastly exacerbated the economic crisis. Meanwhile, public school teachers, many of whom make heroic efforts to lift up the hearts and minds of young people against tremendous obstacles, are to be “held accountable.”



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