

Seattle Schools win federal grant for teacher merit pay

Angelo Bosworth
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Last month, the Obama administration awarded \$12.5 million to the Seattle Public Schools in the state of Washington from the Teacher Incentive Fund, set up to promote merit pay and other teacher “performance-based” incentive schemes.

The provision of the funds, which have also been distributed to other districts in the country, is part of a push to increase testing and victimize teachers for the crisis in education. According to web site of the Teacher Incentive Fund, which is part of the US Department of Education, its aim is to “support efforts to develop and implement performance-based teacher and principal compensation systems in high-need schools.”

The insistence on measuring academic achievement of students using standardized tests, and then tying teacher rewards and penalties to those test scores, has become a cornerstone of the Obama administration’s education policies.

The Bush administration, under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) program, developed a comprehensive program for testing students and labeling schools with lower schools as “failed.” The Obama administration is now intensifying this assault on public education, insisting that schools failing to meet these performance requirements be shut down, turned into charter schools, or have their teachers and staff fired.

The most important tool used in this process has been competition for Race to the Top (RTTT) grants, an attempt to use federal funding to pressure states to implement education policy in line with the administration’s demands. In addition to RTTT, in 2009 the administration announced a significant increase in funding for the Teacher Incentive Fund.

Seattle Public Schools applied for Race to the Top, but the school system did not have a plan for tying

teacher performance to student test scores and therefore did not receive funds.

The district responded by working with the union to push through the measures in the fall. The district’s application for the TIF funds said that it aimed to become “a strong regional model” for performance-based compensation, while noting that its proposal “will need to be bargained with our union partners.”

On September 2, Seattle teachers voted to accept a contract backed by the union, the Seattle Education Association (SEA), that includes increased testing and merit pay. While two-thirds of members reportedly agreed to the measure, there is broad opposition among teachers to the changes, which was reflected in a nearly unanimous vote of no-confidence in the Seattle Schools superintendent by SEA members.

The SEA argued that the teachers had no choice but to accept the changes, in exchange for meager benefits such as a 1 percent salary increase for the last two years in the three-year contract. The contract also relies on the passing of a property tax levy in November. If the levy fails, only parts of the contract will be put in place. This will likely mean further cuts in teacher pay.

The SEA in fact supports merit pay and other reforms, but only urges that the Obama administration work with the union in implementing the attack on teachers. SEA executive director Glenn Bafia said in September, “We’re definitely willing to talk about education reform, but it doesn’t have to be an either/or type of situation—either you do nothing or you go down the road of unresearched, untested reform.”

The attack on teachers is part of sharp cuts in school funding throughout the school district. Five schools have been shut down over the past year.

The revisions in teacher contracts have been promoted by the media and by a number of non-profit

organizations, including the Alliance For Education and the League of Education Voters (LEV). While these groups seek to present themselves as defenders of students and the education process, they are largely funded by wealthy individuals and corporate donors with definite interests in the growing business of education.

In 2008, according to data released by the Alliance For Education, 46 percent of its total revenue came from “major local and national funders, including lead grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, the Stuart Foundation and the Boeing Company.” Another 17 percent was funded by corporations, with individuals making up just 30 percent.

The “2009 Progress Report For LEV Foundation” mentions the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Nick & Leslie Hanauer, and Microsoft Corporation among its top donors. A full 40 percent of its funding came from foundation grants, another 38 percent was from donor advised funds, with corporate gifts making up 10 percent and 11 percent donated by individuals.

The Gates Foundation is certainly not shy in publicly stating its aims in radically changing the public education system, particularly in relation to teachers’ rights and working conditions. According to its web site, the foundation is “investing \$290 million in four communities across the country to support bold and ambitious plans that will transform how teachers are recruited, developed, rewarded, and retained.”



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