

Obama administration continues assault on public education

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On March 9, US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced his prediction that 82 percent of the nation's public schools will fail the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act's Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals this year, up from a 37 percent failure rate last year. His projection, based on a worst-case-scenario estimate of student test scores, was issued only a week prior to a speech by President Obama demanding that Congress "fix" NCLB.

NCLB was enacted under the Bush Administration in 2002. It is now up for reauthorization, and Obama is touring the nation in an attempt to gain support for his proposals.

The president has pitched his proposed changes to NCLB as an attempt to address widespread criticism over the law's overwhelming emphasis on standardized test scores as a measure of educational achievement. However, his administration's "fixes" do not in any way reverse the attack on public education contained in the original bill. Rather, they promote the further privatization of public education and foster the creation of new educational inequalities in America's schools. In addition, Obama's reforms to NCLB lay the basis for an intensified assault on educators' wages, benefits and working conditions.

The changes the Obama Administration proposes for NCLB include the following:

- Replace narrow fill-in-the-bubble tests with "college and career-ready tests," based on the argument that high school graduates should be prepared to either enter university or start work. Despite being dressed up in language intended to give the impression of genuine concern for the life chances of America's youth, this proposal will create a two-track system in the country's schools; a small layer of privileged students will be groomed for a college education, while the remainder will be denied the chance to develop their intellect and skills on the grounds that their tests indicate they are better suited for a "career"—i.e., a low-wage job.

- Greater flexibility for school districts to open charter and pilot schools. This is intended to speed up the process of transferring public institutions to private companies, siphoning off government money and placing it in the hands

of wealthy "non-profit" charter school organizations.

In New Orleans, for example, where the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina was used as an excuse to "charterize" the public school district, the New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) refused to employ experienced educators and instead saved money by hiring low-wage federal interns and newly minted teachers from outside the communities. NSNO schools are notorious for being inadequately staffed to handle students with special needs, behavior problems and other disabilities, and consequently encourage parents to send their children "elsewhere."

- Invest in educational technology "that will help create digital tutors that are as effective as personal tutors." In short, the Obama administration is planning to commit resources to developing technology that will allow for mass layoffs of educators under the guise that computer programs can do just as good a job and be tailored to individual needs.

- Introduce merit pay by linking educators' compensation and job security to student performance on tests. This pay-for-performance system has been widely criticized and discredited by many experts in the sphere of education due to the unequal playing fields that exist between poor and wealthy districts, as well as the uneven distribution of learning disabilities and behavioral issues in every teacher's classroom, all of which negatively affect student test scores.

- While claiming that merit pay will allow for "a great teacher in every classroom and a great principal in every school," Obama's real aim is to blame teachers and school staff for the growing crisis in America's schools and to drive down wages accordingly. With Obama's "reforms," it is a foregone conclusion that teachers who work in the nation's poorer districts will receive substandard evaluations due to their students' weak performance on tests, ultimately losing their jobs. The president's statement that he is "looking to make teaching one of the most honored professions in our society" is a lie.

- Continuation of the Race to the Top (RTTT) program, which rewards states that agree to impose the administration's "reforms" on the public schools with

desperately needed federal money. The Obama administration has requested \$1.35 billion in RTTT for 2011.

One facet of RTTT is the Investing in Innovation Fund, which provides money for schools to create partnerships with private sector and philanthropic foundations. The result is to give billionaire philanthropists such as Bill Gates and Eli and Edythe Broad, who support the privatization of the schools, vast influence over public education.

- Identify the bottom five percent of schools based on student performance and force them to adopt one of four “intervention” schemes in order to receive government funding: firing of the principal, firing of half the staff, conversion to a charter school, or closure.

In making the case for these interventions, the Obama administration has celebrated the achievements of so-called “turn around” schools (for example, Miami Central High School, and Graham Road Elementary and Kenmore Middle School, both in Virginia), where such measures have already been implemented. Never once is it mentioned that the most troublesome or “underperforming” students have been “let go” during these transformations, or that the cash infusions received by the schools after implementing one of the four schemes were the deciding factor in improving student performance.

- Promote voluntarism among parents by doubling “the federal investment in family engagement” and providing “new incentives for schools to develop innovative ways to engage parents and community members.” The aim of this measure is to shift the burden of public education on to parents and then to blame struggling working class families for supposedly failing their children when they are unable to assume roles previously played by paid staff—e.g., teachers, coaches, guidance counselors, etc.

To see the meaning of Obama’s education “reforms” one needs only look at cities like Detroit, New Orleans and New York, which have been used as testing grounds for the White House education agenda. In these areas, residents have witnessed mass closures of public schools, the firing of teachers, the displacement of tens of thousands of students, and a vast expansion of privately run charter schools with undemocratic admissions policies.

What the White House has willfully left unaddressed in its proposed “fixes” to NCLB is the problem of unfunded mandates. The bill requires public schools to meet a vast array of standards and dramatically improve student achievement without providing the money or resources necessary to address these demands.

Likewise, the Obama administration has done nothing to alleviate poverty in the neighborhoods where the nation’s

lowest-performing schools inevitably exist. Rather, by failing to provide jobs for the unemployed, refusing to offer genuine relief to millions of families losing their homes, and axing social programs, the White House has only created greater hardships for these communities.

In his March 14 address on NCLB, Obama stated that “the need for swift reform has never been greater,” making clear that his administration plans to move forward with its assault on public education as quickly as possible so that there is no time for mass opposition to build.

The Obama administration’s assault on public education has met no real resistance from the major teachers’ unions—the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA). In fact, quite the opposite is true. Over the course of the last year in states applying for RTTT funding, unions have agreed to link teacher evaluations to student test scores. Likewise, they have raised little opposition to the lifting of caps on charter schools. In addition, union bureaucrats like AFT head Randi Weingarten have not only agreed to, but celebrated, the “necessity” of doing away with seniority and teacher tenure protections. They absurdly insist that management can be trusted to make dismissal decisions for the “right” reasons.

The role of the teachers’ unions in the present assault on public education was revealed in recent events Wisconsin, during which the labor bureaucracy repeatedly expressed its willingness to push through massive concessions in wages and benefits if the governor would stop trying to force through a law ending collective bargaining rights for public employees. Since Governor Scott Walker refused to acquiesce and pushed through passage of the legislation, the teachers’ unions across Wisconsin have been scrambling to sign contract extensions before the law takes effect that contain huge givebacks in compensation and working conditions but retain the dues checkoff. In recent weeks, the union leadership has instructed its members to abandon their protests and return to work, agreeing to punish workers who attended mass demonstrations during work hours through a combination of wage forfeits and job suspensions.

The author also recommends:

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[08 February 2011]



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