

Obama extends educational “competition” to preschoolers

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The Obama administration is pressing ahead with its reactionary agenda of restructuring public education in order to slash billions in federal spending and tailor the school system directly to the needs of corporate America. Echoing the “free market” mantra of the Republicans, the president and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, are using their control of federal funding to compel public schools and now even pre-kindergarten programs to compete for desperately needed money.

Earlier this week, the president extended his plan to include Head Start, the pre-school program run by the Department of Health and Human Services, which began during the “War on Poverty” era in 1965. Head Start centers across the country, which serve about 900,000 largely low-income students per year, have long been praised for providing critical resources for poor preschoolers.

Instead of having their funding renewed automatically, “for the first time in history,” Head Start centers would have to compete for funds, Obama announced in a public appearance at the Yeadon Regional Head Start center in Pennsylvania Tuesday morning. “We’re not just gonna put money into programs that don’t work,” Obama declared.

Under the plan, centers that rank among the bottom 25 percent in teaching benchmarks defined by the administration will have to compete with private pre-school companies. “If a program isn’t giving children the support they need to be ready for school,” the president said, “then other organizations will be able to compete for the grant.”

Under the president’s new rules, Head Start grants will be good for five years. Afterwards, each program’s performance will be re-evaluated to determine whether it is meeting the benchmarks or must compete for another grant. Administration officials estimate that about one third of Head Start programs will be affected by the new standards.

In announcing the measure, the president demagogically attacked Republicans for slashing funding from pre-school and public education programs and blocking his initiatives to supposedly address unemployment and the educational crisis. In fact, the plan for Head Start is simply a rehash of measures passed by the Bush administration in 2007 to attack the federal program.

This administration had previously introduced its Race to the Top (RTTT) competition for early-childhood education. To win a portion of the \$500 million a year grant, states have to develop rating systems for their programs, craft standards and tests for young children, and set guidelines for what teachers should know.

In elementary and secondary education, the administration has already threatened school districts with financial ruin unless they tear up employment security for teachers, introduce more test-based achievement standards and funnel more resources into private companies and charter schools.

A central aspect of the administration’s policies is dismantling the guaranteed funding programs established during the 1960s. This includes so-called Title 1 funding, enacted as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which mandated additional resources to schools and districts with high percentages of low-income students.

Instead of guaranteeing these funds, the administration is forcing schools to compete for Title 1 money based on introducing its “reform” agenda.

The US Senate is now debating changes to the federal No Child Left Behind law (NCLB), which was implemented by the Bush administration in 2002. The law institutionalized test-based evaluations and punitive measures against teachers in “failing” schools, scapegoating them for the consequences of decades of cuts and the growth of poverty and social inequality.

While many teachers hoped Obama would overturn the hated law, he has only escalated teacher firings, school closures and the privatization of schools.

Six weeks ago the administration made official its plan to offer “flexibility waivers,” allowing states to temporarily escape some of the mandates of NCLB, including the requirement that all students be 100 percent proficient in math and reading/language arts by 2014.

The waivers are simply an acknowledgement of the bogus targets set by the Bush administration under conditions in which the state of public education has only worsened due to the economic crisis, draconian budget cuts and the elimination of hundreds of thousands of teachers and other school workers.

The waivers provide a two-year reprieve from specific NCLB

mandates, with the possibility for a one-year extension afterwards. Far from providing a relief for teachers, however, the waivers will actually speed up the implementation of the administration's attacks.

In announcing the plan, Duncan said one of his "highest priorities is to help ensure that Federal laws and policies support the significant reforms underway in many States and school districts and do not hinder State and local innovation aimed at increasing the quality of instruction and improving student academic achievement."

Duncan will exercise a dictatorial control over granting waivers. Under NCLB, states could request waivers from certain requirements without stipulations. Duncan will now compel states to enact all of his reforms to get relief from the mandates.

States will either have to accept the harsh consequences of failing to achieve 100 percent proficiency, replete with the decimation of school districts through "turn-around" reforms, or agree to many of the very same "reforms" to receive a waiver.

States will be given choices of the kind of "improvements" to implement in low-performing schools; however, they must still be guided by the basic NCLB "turn-around" principles, including offering students the option to transfer to better performing schools at the district's expense, lengthening the school day, week, or year, providing and paying for mandatory tutoring. The guidelines also include firing the principal and half the staff, conversion to charter, or closure.

States will also have the option on how to allocate Title I funds, further undermining the principle that schools with high numbers of low-income students will be guaranteed federal funding.

States and districts will also be allowed to scrap "Highly Qualified Teacher" requirements, mandating them to hire teachers with appropriate degrees and licensure, which will pave the way to hire far more lower-paid, and likely unqualified, teachers.

In return for waivers, states will be required to adopt College and Career Ready (CCR) standards and assessments that ensure students will not require remedial courses upon entering college. To be CCR-certifiable, state tests will be more difficult to pass, either through more difficult questions or by raising the score required for passing the state tests. This will have a chilling effect on the ability of struggling students to apply to or succeed in college, especially students with learning disabilities and English language learners.

States must also publicly identify five percent of the lowest-performing schools receiving Title I funds, labeled as "priority schools," and enact aggressive interventions based on the "turn-around" principles. In addition, states must publicly identify another 10 percent of "focus" schools, which are Title I schools performing just above the bottom 5 percent, and enact interventions also based on the turn-around principles. This will

result in states adopting punitive measures in far more schools than under NCLB!

Finally, states must create and implement teacher and principal evaluation systems that incorporate student performance measures, and that are used to "inform personnel decisions," including staffing of schools, and retention and layoffs.

Under these conditions, seniority and tenure protections for teachers will become a thing of the past. This has been a central aim of the Obama administration, which has incorporated this demand into rules for receiving RTTT awards, education funds under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), and now an NCLB waiver.

Days after announcing the waivers package, Obama delivered a speech to students at a Washington, D.C. magnet school attended largely by poor, minority students. In his speech, he reiterated his nostrum that poverty was no excuse for failure.

"Some of your families might ... be feeling the drain of the economy.... And so ... you might have to pick up an after-school job to help out your family, or maybe you're babysitting for a younger sibling because mom or dad is working an extra shift.... [This] means you've got to work as hard as you know how to work."

This from a president who has overseen one of the greatest transfers of wealth into the hands of the financial elite in history while tens of millions of working class families have been plunged into destitution.

This attack on public education has not stopped the managers of the two teachers unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, from going all out in Obama's reelection campaign. In a recently released document, the NEA showered praise on president's efforts to "fix" NCLB. For the NEA and AFT officials the only thing that matters is that the Obama administration intends to use their services to pursue its "reform" agenda.



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