

# Obama pushes program to turn public schools over to corporations

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President Barack Obama made a well-publicized helicopter landing in New York City's borough of Brooklyn October 25 to visit Pathways in Technology Early College High School, known as P-TECH. It is a public school where IBM has been placed in charge, and Obama used the appearance to promote a new expansion of government efforts to privatize public education. He was accompanied by Bill de Blasio, who has subsequently been elected as mayor, and United Federation of Teachers (UFT) president Michael Mulgrew.

Opened in 2011, P-TECH is an enhancement of career and technical education (CTE). Formerly known as vocational education, courses such as carpentry, air conditioning, electrical engineering and cooking had been greatly cut back under the rationale that they resulted in tracking that left disadvantaged children unprepared for college. CTE, it is claimed, overcomes this issue by combining modern skills, such as computer sciences, with academics, including college credit-bearing courses.

The P-TECH model further moves students toward "college readiness" beginning in the ninth grade by being a six-year program, partnering with the City University to provide graduating students with an associate degree for 2-years' college credit.

At P-TECH, IBM writes the curriculum and hires staff. Outgoing mayor Michael Bloomberg is opening five more high schools focused on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) skills in partnerships with the Con Edison and National Grid energy companies, Microsoft, business technology firm SAP, the American Association of Advertising Agencies, and New York Presbyterian and Montefiore hospitals.

Graduates are promised "priority" but not guaranteed

entry-level jobs at IBM. IBM claims P-TECH schools will help fill job openings for which there were not enough qualified applicants. It is claimed that students will be better prepared to find jobs requiring STEM skills needed for modern industries. Behind that lies the axiom of the educational reform movement: that the US must have a workforce able to compete in the global economy.

The reality is that global technology corporations like IBM close down plants and scour the earth for the cheapest labor, with the consequence of driving down wages in the US.

The *National Journal* noted that "Like a lot of tech-related firms, IBM recognized a few years ago that it had a habit of hiring people with bachelor's degrees for openings that only require associate degrees, according to Robin Willner, vice president of IBM's Global Community initiatives."

Greg Lindsay in *Next City* pointed out how since 2005 IBM's workforce has decreased by 32 percent to 91,000, while in 2009 it hired nearly 10 times as many workers in India and the Asia/Pacific region as in the US. The majority were skilled tech jobs. While IBM is making record profits as the ninth largest US company, it is dumping 110,000 retirees from the company health care programs onto Medicare and a private Medicare exchange run by Towers Watson.

P-TECH is part of the so-called educational reform movement that has been transforming education nationwide, often with initial funding to budget-needy states and school districts from billionaires, such as Bill Gates, and competitively awarded funding from the Obama administration. Obama and partners like Bloomberg have overseen the destruction of at least 300,000 teachers' jobs, the shutdown of 4,000 schools (164 in New York City), and the doubling of the

number of students enrolled in privately run charter schools (183 in New York City).

In November, Obama announced \$100 million in funding for a “Youth Career Connect” program. Like his Race To The Top funding, grants will be awarded to a limited number of schools by competition, for programs preparing students for high-growth industries, such as in high-tech and health. There is no guarantee of federal funding beyond the initial amounts.

With states severely cutting budgets, the School Superintendents Association has said it is “opposed to the administration’s continued reliance on competitive funding as the primary way to provide additional funding to a limited number of the nation’s schools.”

Obama’s former chief of staff, Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel, who closed 50 schools in June, announced that he would open up five schools to be partnered with IBM, Microsoft, Cisco, Verizon and Motorola. New York’s Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo has set aside \$4 million toward setting up 16 other P-TECH type schools across New York State, partnering with businesses that include Cisco, GE, Lockheed-Martin, Bombardier, Avon, and Wegmans as well as IBM. Early college STEM model high school programs exist as well in the states of North Carolina, Massachusetts, Washington, and Idaho.

More than two dozen CTE schools have been opened in New York City since 2003, seven in 2013 alone. Telecommunications giant AT&T is donating \$1.6 million to expand software engineering curriculum for students in 12 New York City public high schools. Code.org, founded by Bill Gates of Microsoft, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, Jack Dorsey of Twitter, and Max Levichen of PayPal, donated \$1 million for computer science instruction in New York City, and \$2 million to Chicago, where the plan is to make computer science a required course in high school.

The Department of Education (DOE) also plans to open an “iZone Academy” in the offices of small start-up businesses in the tech sector, with \$100,000 in start-up funds from the Gates-funded non-profit Next Generation. The school is billed as having “the potential to disrupt the systemic structures of age-based cohorts, scheduling, space, grading policies and more.”

In joining the visit to P-TECH, Mayor-elect de Blasio in effect gave his blessings to one of Bloomberg’s ongoing efforts to promote what is euphemistically

called “public-private” partnerships. Bloomberg has been selling off public assets, such as land under city schools and libraries to real estate developers in return for new private buildings that would in some cases also house a school or library. And even as privately run charter schools are given increasing space in public school buildings, schools are depending ever more on private funding for programs such as art and music after years of budget cuts.

The visit by Obama and de Blasio delivered the message that the education “reform” attacks and corporatization of education would continue regardless of the change in mayors.

The national and New York teachers’ unions have made sure to be included in the CTE campaign, hosting a conference of business and union leaders along with workforce and education policy experts, and government officials in New York two weeks before Obama’s visit. A visit to P-TECH and other CTE schools was included.

Rupert Murdoch, the media mogul, who with Gates has promoted a mandated system of providing student’s private data to businesses, described education as “a \$500 billion market in the U.S. alone that is waiting desperately to be transformed.”

The whole trend in public education at all levels, in the face of budget cuts and the testing regime, is to subordinate everything to private profit and corporate interests. The pursuit of these ends goes hand in hand with the slashing of every vestige of humanist, creative education, as in art, music, physical education, history and philosophy and diminishing training in critical thinking regarding the nature of society.



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