

Obama's 2015 budget continues attack on public education

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The proposed 2015 fiscal year (FY) federal education budget released earlier this month by the Obama administration represents a significant escalation in the destruction of public education in the United States. If fully implemented, it will mark a fundamental reversal in the concept of equal access to a public education.

The budget proposal of \$68.6 billion for the Department of Education is a \$1.3 billion increase over FY 2014; however, it is far less than the \$77.4 billion proposed in 2012, and below the \$69.8 billion proposed in 2013.

In posturing as an opponent of the austerity policies of the Republicans, Obama has called for additional education funds from the proposed Opportunity, Growth, and Security Initiative (OGSI), which totals \$56 billion, half of which will go to domestic programs and the other half to defense spending. The Obama administration knows full well this initiative has no prospect of passing in Congress.

OGSI would provide \$750 million in additional funding to three separate Department of Education programs: \$250 million for competitive Preschool Development Grants; \$300 million for Connect-Educators, a program which pays for broadband technologies and digital resources for school districts; and \$200 million for Promise Zones and Promise Neighborhoods programs.

The regressive nature of Obama's budget proposal is epitomized by the fact that it provides no increase to Title I funding for poor school districts. The program will be frozen at last year's level of \$14.4 billion. Title I was established as part of the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), which was a central component of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty program. It was intended to provide a modicum of equality throughout school districts by providing additional funding to schools with a higher percentage of poor students.

In response to this de facto cut, the School Superintendents' Association (AASA) commented that "Level funding for Title I, in the context of increasing demand, increasing costs, and the cessation of federal emergency funding [American Recovery and Reinvestment

Act funds], will translate into reduced per-pupil funding levels."

Federal funding for the Integrated Disability Education and Awareness Program (IDEA), which subsidizes special education programs, will also be frozen at last year's level of \$11.5 billion. The budget does include \$100 million in competitive grants to "help schools improve special education outcomes."

Public schools have seen an increase in the number of special needs students in recent years, especially since the onset of the economic crisis. Hence, such cuts will have a detrimental effect on the most vulnerable students. Teachers will likewise suffer job losses and pay cuts as they are blamed for the inevitable repercussions of funding reductions to these critical programs.

According to the AASA, level funding of IDEA, without adjusting for inflation, "puts the federal investment at 15.6 percent, less than half of the promised 40 percent of the additional cost of educating students with special needs." The burden has been "shifted to local districts, forcing school districts to raise local taxes or cut general education programs."

The budget also introduces a new version of the notorious Race to the Top (RTTT) program, this time labeled the RTTT for "Equity and Opportunity." Yet another in a long list of competitive grant programs, the new rendition of RTTT will offer \$300 million in grants to states and districts to create data systems that track teacher and principal "effectiveness," as well as students' academic achievement and coursework at the nation's poorest schools.

Whereas Title I provides formula funding to school districts based strictly on the percentage of students living below the federal poverty level, RTTT is awarded competitively and only to districts that agree to enact punitive "reforms," including evaluating teachers based on students' standardized test scores, and closing or privatizing "failing" schools.

RTTT-Equity and Opportunity goes further than its precursor in that it will push successful teachers out of so-

called high-performing schools into the lowest-performing ones. Education Secretary Arne Duncan commented that there isn't a single school district that is "systematically identifying" its "hardest-working" teachers and "moving that talent to underserved communities."

Without addressing the immense impact of poverty on students' ability to succeed, the teachers moved into these so-called low-performing schools are being set up to fail. This maneuver, meant only to give the administration a populist gloss, is nothing more than a ploy to rid schools of senior teachers who have higher salaries and still have a degree of job security.

Also slated to go without a funding increase is the sole federal program for rural schools, the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), which is still reeling from sequester-related cuts imposed last year. AASA points out that this represents "a triple setback for rural communities, who [also] find themselves with decreased ... Title I funding that is still not restored to pre-sequester levels, and [who are] less likely to have the capacity to successfully navigate the competitive grant program application and implementation process," i.e., RTTT.

Obama has also called for a "comprehensive effort to rethink the high school experience," by proposing \$150 million for a new competitive grant program to "redesign" high schools. Schools that receive funding will be expected to "partner with employers and institutions of higher education to give students access to work experiences" that will supposedly provide them with the "knowledge and skills that will help them succeed."

What Obama is proposing is a fundamental restructuring of high schools to force working class students into narrow low-wage job tracks, which will vastly reduce any opportunity for going to college and will place them in a vulnerable position if their "skills" do not match the needs of big business years after they graduate.

That the majority of working class students will be denied access to a full curriculum in the arts and sciences, first advocated by public education pioneers like Horace Mann in the 19th century, and the opportunity to explore their full potential as demanded by figures like John Dewey, is the central point of this utterly retrograde initiative. Instead students will be denied the right to a complete education and the public schools will be transformed to meet the most immediate needs of American big business.

Obama is also proposing to fund a "Preschool for All" program, which he first proposed in 2013, but was not enacted because Congress claimed it was too expensive. Now, however, the administration is proposing that the program be paid for in part by a tax hike on tobacco products and in part by competitive "Preschool

Development Grants" in the amount of \$500 million, with an additional \$250 million through OGS. No direct federal spending will go into the program.

The Preschool Development Grants would allow private investors and businesses to develop and operate pre-schools. The desperate need for preschool education is already being exploited by such financial interests as Goldman-Sachs, which has begun profiting off of preschools in Utah by offering loans to hard-pressed districts after the state refused to expand funding. The proposed preschool grants will offer a direct means for the financial industry and big business to profit off of public education without the added nuisance of floating loans to impoverished districts.

On the other hand, Head Start, a federally funded program created in 1965, to provide preschool to low-income families, is designated to receive a minimal increase of around \$120 million next year. Even this small amount is likely to be defeated.

The proposed budget includes increases for other initiatives that hand over public tax dollars to big business, including the Investing in Innovation fund (i3), which funds "partnerships" between public schools and the private sector, and the Promise Zones and Promise Neighborhoods programs, which award tax dollars to businesses that open charter schools and create low-wage jobs in poor urban communities and neighborhoods.

Both of the major teachers unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have proclaimed their approval of the budget, which is telling given the overall condemnation of it by the AASA. Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT, pledged that the union would continue to work with the administration, while NEA spokesperson Mary Kubler stated that the NEA "is happy with the budget."

Conversely, the AASA stated that it is "deeply concerned by the Administration's continued reliance on competitive grants and the fact that virtually every new dollar proposed for K12 programs is competitive." It "questions the sincerity of a commitment to equity in a funding schema that creates a default 'winner' and 'loser,'" and criticizes the conception "that competition alone produces innovation and student achievement."



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