

Obama administration launches new attack on teachers

Isabelle Belanger
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This summer, US Education Secretary Arne Duncan, standing alongside American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, announced the Excellent Educators for All initiative, marking a new stage in the Obama administration's assault on teachers and dismantling of public education.

The proposal is an adaptation of a long-ignored component of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), implemented under the Republican administration of George W. Bush, requiring that states provide students of all socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds equal access to "highly qualified" teachers.

From the beginning, this stipulation was for window dressing only, since one school district after another carried out budget cuts, mass layoffs and school closings and experienced teachers were replaced with lower-paid, inexperienced instructors. This process has accelerated under the Obama administration.

Nevertheless, under the terms of NCLB, "highly qualified" was defined as a teacher having a minimum of a Bachelor's degree and possessing state certification in the subject area he or she is hired to teach. The ostensible goal of the proposal was to "ensure that poor and minority students are not taught at higher rates than other children by inexperienced, unqualified, or out-of-field teachers."

The new initiative by the Obama administration, however, switches the focus from "highly qualified" teachers to those who are said to be "highly effective," ie., teachers whose students perform satisfactorily on standardized tests.

This seemingly minor change in wording means that the once objective means of gauging teacher quality by subject-area degree and certification area has been altered to one that is almost entirely subjective, based as it is on the singular focus on standardized test scores.

Such a focus ignores a host of other measures of effectiveness such as students' scores on teacher-created tests, projects and other assignments, the ability to instill an understanding and appreciation of the subject matter in students, and many other less tangible measures of

successful teaching.

Rather than provide the necessary resources to overcome poverty and reverse the decades-long financial starvation of the public schools, the Obama administration, with the help of the teachers unions, is seeking to paint the picture that impoverished school districts lack—not the elemental necessities for a decent educational environment—but teachers who are determined and dedicated enough to overcome these problems! This is an utter fraud.

While feigning concern over the plight of poor and minority students Obama has spearheaded an unprecedented attack on highly qualified teachers and the children they teach. Since taking office, more than 300,000 teachers and other school employees have lost their jobs, thousands of public schools have been shut in Chicago, Detroit and other cities, and the administration has provided incentives for corporations and other business hucksters to open charter schools employing the most inexperienced instructors.

Aspects of the new initiative were present in Obama's Fiscal Year 2015 education budget with its latest rendition of the notorious Race To The Top (RTTT) program, this time called RTTT-Equity and Opportunity. The budget includes \$300 million in grants to states and districts to create data systems that track teacher and principal "effectiveness," as well as student achievement at the nation's poorest schools.

The Excellent Educators for All plan will force senior educators out of schools where students perform adequately on standardized tests (primarily due to the better financial circumstances of students attending such schools) and place them into the districts' poorest performing schools, which largely serve students mired in poverty and suffering from related problems of hunger, illness, utility shut-offs, crime and other social ills.

There are three main components to the Excellent Educators program:

1. By April 2015, states will be required to submit "comprehensive educator equity plans" that describe how they will place "effective educators" in the classrooms of poor and minority students. By October 2015, states will

have to prove that these students are not being disproportionately taught by “ineffective” teachers.

2. The Department of Education (DOE) will spend \$4.2 million on an “Education Equity Support Network” whose purpose will be to help states write the comprehensive educator equity plans. According to a DOE press release, the network will also “work to develop model plans, share promising packages, provide communities of practice for educators to discuss challenges and share lessons learned with each other, and create a network of support for educators working in high-need schools.”

The provision of such a paltry sum to supposedly provide support for educators working with some of the nation’s most deprived children is utterly reprehensible. It is an affront to those teachers whose careers will be in jeopardy once they are placed in schools where low test scores are primarily the result of poverty, and have little to do with teacher quality.

3. The DOE will publish “Educator Equity profiles” which “will help states identify gaps in access to quality teaching for low-income and minority students.... States will be able to conduct detailed analyses of the data to inform their discussions about local inequities and design strategies for improving those inequities.”

Much like the publishing of the standardized test scores of teachers’ students, the publishing of districts’ Educator Equity profiles will be used to promote public anger with school districts, which will be presented as purposely staffing low-performing schools with ineffective teachers. Likewise, district officials and the media will impugn teachers as self-serving for wanting to work in high-performing schools rather than with the poorest achieving students.

In the past, teachers were offered higher salaries to work in the nations’ highest need areas, it being difficult to attract teachers to work in schools that are generally understaffed, in disrepair and having inadequate resources, and where learning and behavior problems are a daily occurrence. However, the offer of better pay did help to attract and keep capable teachers in these struggling schools.

Now, with most states basing a large portion of teacher evaluations on students’ standardized test scores, such financial incentives are of little consequence. As for all workers, a higher salary means little if there is no guarantee that the job will exist in a year’s time. The best teachers—including those currently working in poorer districts—will likely accept a lower salary in a more resourced school district, due to the knowledge that students’ test scores will likely be adequate to allow them to receive acceptable evaluations year after year, and therefore keep their jobs.

Significantly, the DOE has not yet developed a definition for what constitutes teacher “effectiveness.” One can assume the definition, once made, will be based almost exclusively on standardized test scores, as has been the mechanism for funding schools and making decisions over school closures and privatizations under both the Bush and Obama administrations.

In an address before teachers, President Obama asked, “what are they [the states] doing in order to train and promote and place teachers in some of the toughest environments for children....the kids who probably need less help get the most....” Obama stands reality on its head, since his administration has condemned millions of youth to live in the “toughest environments” by slashing food stamps, long-term unemployment benefits and essential programs, while overseeing the greatest transfer of wealth to the rich in history.

In the book *Whither Opportunity?: Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children’s Life Chances*, edited by Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane (2011), which is comprised of a series of groundbreaking studies on the effects of inequality on educational attainment, the concluding sentence asks: “If poverty places students at risk of educational failure ..., would not intervening in poverty directly contribute to educational improvement?” The terrible circumstances facing millions of American children, however, are not of concern to the Obama administration; rather, it is teachers who are blamed for the problems created by the decayed capitalist order.

Predictably the trade union executives who run the AFT and NEA have joined in this continued effort to scapegoat teachers and destroy their job protections, seeking only to maintain a “seat at the table” while public education is dismantled.

Following Duncan’s announcement of the initiative, AFT President Randi Weingarten stated, “The Excellent Educators for All project...is necessary and important.... Secretary Duncan offer[s] an approach that does something for children by empowering teachers, not stripping them of their rights. We look forward to working with the secretary....”

The National Education Association is also on board with NEA President Dennis Van Roekel saying the union “fully supported the new plan.”



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