

US education secretary promises no let-up in standardized testing

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Last week, addressing a group of educators at a Washington, D.C. elementary school, Education Secretary Arne Duncan postured as an opponent of Bush-era education policies, while defending and promoting the continued use of the same reactionary measures by the Obama administration, including the use of standardized test scores to evaluate and punish students and teachers.

With the Republican-led Congress set to begin reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Democratic administration is defending Bush's reviled No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, the most recent rendition of the ESEA, originally signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965.

Obama—whose first election was backed by millions of teachers and parents who hoped he would overturn NCLB—has instead vastly intensified the use of test scores to scapegoat teachers for the outcome of decades of anti-education policies and the growth of poverty among public school students. His administration has initiated the use of competitive funding schemes, under the Race to the Top program, to award federal Title 1 funds to states and school districts that agree to tie teacher and student evaluations almost exclusively to standardized test scores. The program also promotes privatization by requiring states to increase the number of privately run but publicly funded charter schools.

The ESEA was enacted under Johnson's "War on Poverty." Its purpose was to guarantee federal money, including Title 1 funds, to schools where at least 40 percent of students live in poverty so students in poor urban and rural schools had access to resources and services, including up-to-date school libraries and programs to assist bilingual and Native American students. While never realizing genuine equity with wealthier school districts, the program was designed to provide greater federal assistance based on need. For this reason, Title 1 has long been despised by sections of the ruling class who have worked, since its inception, to dilute its impact and tie it to measures other than poverty.

NCLB marked a major shift in how Title 1 funds were disbursed to high poverty districts. Rather than directing federal money to schools based solely on poverty, the Bush administration was successful in forcing through the ruling

elite's long-sought-after evaluation measures, which tie the receipt of Title 1 funds to students' standardized test scores.

Since the Obama administration enacted RTTT's competitive funding measures, thousands of teachers have lost their jobs, as professional evaluations are increasingly tied solely to students' scores on standardized tests, rather than to teacher-created tests and other traditional projects and assignments. Hundreds of thousands more teachers lost their jobs due to annual budget slashing, which increased exponentially after the 2008 financial crisis.

In addition, hundreds of schools have been privatized or closed under the federal government's policy of punishing students for not performing well on these tests.

Under Obama's policies, classroom instruction has suffered immeasurably, as teachers no longer have time for creative lessons due to the immense pressure of preparing students for high-stakes tests. While schools are starved of money for hiring teachers, field trips or other enrichment activities, tax dollars go for testing materials, data software and other state and federal mandates that come with little or no funding.

The Obama administration is well aware of the growing anger over standardized testing. While Duncan defends the continued reliance on these tests, the White House is responding to public ire by claiming it will work to decrease the number of tests students have to take.

"Sometimes, educators are better at starting new things than we are at stopping things," Duncan—who never spent a day teaching in a classroom—said, acknowledging that "several decades of testing ideas have sometimes been layered on top of each other in ways that are redundant and duplicative, and not helpful." He continued, "To help states and districts make these changes and come up with a more coherent strategy, the President will request funding in his budget to help improve the quality of tests and to get rid of those that are unnecessary."

While this "strategy" does nothing to address the overuse of standardized testing, it creates a scenario where a smaller number of tests will have far greater consequences. Duncan said, "all students need to take annual, statewide assessments...in reading and math in grades 3 through 8, and once in high school." In other words, teachers, whose evaluations are increasingly aligned with their students' test

scores, potentially face the loss of their jobs based solely on the results of two tests. Worse still is the effect that a single test will have on high school students' futures. The failure to pass one test could have life-changing consequences for students, including the inability to go to college!

As previously reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*, in 2012 the *New York Times* published a report on research conducted by Walter Stroup, a professor in the College of Education at the University of Texas-Austin, which threatens to "shake the foundation of high-stakes test-based accountability." The study revealed what appears to be "a glitch in the DNA of the state exams that...suggests they are virtually useless at measuring the effects of classroom instruction."

Last April, the American Statistical Association denounced the use of "value-added measures" (VAM)—the use of standardized test scores—to evaluate teachers. "Most VAM studies find that teachers account for about 1% to 14% of the variability in test scores, and that the majority of opportunities for quality improvement are found in the system-level conditions." This included "factors outside of the teacher's control such as student and family background, poverty, curriculum, and unmeasured influences."

The many factors determining student achievement, the Education Research Association and National Academy of Education said were class size; access to tutors, specialists and learning resources; home and community challenges; health; prior teachers and schooling; summer learning loss, "which especially affects low-income children."

The Obama administration blatantly ignores this growing body of research. This only underscores the fact that both big business parties have repudiated the basic democratic and egalitarian ideals embodied in public education. The American ruling class has increasingly adopted the aristocratic conception that only the most privileged should receive high-quality education.

Obama's jobs program, in which global corporations are enticed to bring manufacturing operations back to the US, is based entirely on the creation of a compliant, low-wage work force. The federal Common Core Curriculum, as well as the financial starvation of the public schools, is meant to identify and track a small number of the most promising students while condemning the majority, most of who live in poverty, to poorly funded schools and the loss of any hope for bettering themselves through a college education.

Meanwhile, various privatization schemes are funneling ever more tax dollars into the coffers of for-profit charter school operatives. The attack on teachers represents an integral component of the dismantling of public education, whereby all of the gains won over a century of struggle, including job security, decent pay and a good educational atmosphere, are done away with.

This takes place as child poverty is worse than ever. According to a report by the Southern Education Foundation

(SEF), low-income children now make up the majority of students enrolled in American public schools, up from 48 percent in 2011 and 38 percent in 2000.

This is the highest level of student poverty in at least 50 years, ironically the same year that the ESEA was signed into law in one of the last major efforts on the part of the American bourgeoisie to enact reforms to counter social and economic inequality.

In his speech, Duncan attempted to cast himself as a part of the "Great Society" tradition, in which reforms were aimed at reducing high levels of poverty, especially among racial minorities. The Obama administration, however, has nothing in common with this final expression of bourgeois liberalism in the US. Rather, all of its education policies have been aimed at the dismantling of past reforms, privatizing education for profit-making entities and stripping teachers of their job security and professional status by blaming them for the crisis of poverty.

On January 11, more than 20 liberal "civil rights" and "education advocacy" groups released a statement expressing support for the Obama administration's testing regime, leaving many teachers and parent groups feeling confused and betrayed. That these organizations defend competitive funding and privatization, as well as the testing regimen, is due to their longstanding ties to the Democratic Party and their own designs on the public resources becoming available from carving up the public school system.

Likewise, Randi Weingarten, head of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—the nation's second largest teachers union—stated, "we are glad the secretary has acknowledged that 'there are too many tests that take up too much time' and that 'we need to take action to support a better balance.'" Weingarten feigned concern that the administration is continuing its fixation on punitive testing—the same policies that the AFT has continuously supported and helped to implement in the face of massive opposition from rank-and-file teachers.

Workers confront a two-party system that has moved sharply to the right. The Democratic Party defends a Republican-created right-wing education policy, despised by teachers, parents and students, while the Republican Party cynically uses this widespread disgust to dismantle any federal laws governing funding and legal equity in the public education system. To defend public education, it is necessary for workers to break from the two big business parties and the capitalist order they serve, and fight for a workers' government to put society's resources as the disposal of the vast majority, not the wealthy few.



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