

Obama budget cuts target high school counselors

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A cynical event honoring the School Counselor of the Year was held at the White House at the end of January. The photo-op was purportedly part of “600 new actions to help more students prepare for and graduate from college.”

The “600 actions” are largely pledges by dozens of colleges to increase the number of graduates, with various college-funded programs to utilize analytics, provide “transparency in outcomes” and “encourage accountability.” No suggestion was made of the need to provide funding for school counselors.

Just the opposite. In the 2015 education budget request, the president has again requested the termination of the only real federal support for districts to provide counseling, the Elementary and Secondary Education Counseling (ESEC) grant program. Obama has called for all funding for the program to be folded into a general “wellness” scheme.

Among the largely cosmetic pledges in his public relations package, however, was support for an alternative to school counselors—the College Advisor Corps, a nonprofit that is creating a subclass of untrained college “mentors.” The initiative is lifted from the playbook of an increasingly discredited Teach for America.

When schools are hit with budget crises—as have been unrelentingly during the entire Obama administration—school counselors and other non-classroom personnel are the first on the chopping block. Spending on K-12 schools has been cut in 44 out of 50 US states between 2007 and 2012. Additionally, Title I—the federal program for the most impoverished schools—declined under the Obama administration by 10 percent last year, and funding for students with disabilities fell another 11 percent.

These cuts have translated into the loss of some

300,000 school district jobs nationally since 2008 and led to a catastrophic shortage of counselors and psychologists.

Presently there is one college counselor for every 471 students in the United States. California has only one counselor for every 1,016 students. In 2008, the ratio nationally was 1-to-457. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) considers 1-to-250 a desirable ratio. Today students can expect to meet with a school counselor, on average, for 20 minutes in an entire school year. One in five high schools has no counselors on staff at all.

The ASCA says the most devastating impact is among the youngest learners. “At the elementary level, there are lots of classroom lessons and activities that go on to help students develop the academic skills and behaviors that they need in order to be successful throughout their entire academic careers,” said ASCA assistant director Eric Sparks. He added, “With fewer counselors to support them, those kids are not getting the school counseling programming, and they’re not getting the individual services that they need.”

Brian Martin, a former counselor from Hamilton, Ohio, said, “The student-to-counselor ratio is higher than it has ever been ... (as) schools are almost being asked to serve as social service agencies.”

Belle Allen, a guidance counselor since 1996, told the *Cincinnati Enquirer* that years ago “we did a lot of scheduling, a lot about colleges, but now there are a lot of mental health issues that students are dealing with.” More than 50 percent of US schoolchildren are living in poverty, and rising social tensions are inevitably reflected in the school environment.

At the same time, high school students are left without assistance despite the fact that the college application process (not to mention the struggle for

financial aid) becomes more complicated every year. A series of standardized tests, fees and acquiring numerous written recommendations are the baseline demands for even one college application. Some students submit as many as a dozen of these applications, with countless additional forms for winning some type of financial aid or scholarship.

The College Advising Corps (CAC) began in 2004 at the University of Virginia. After being feted by the Obama administration and turned into a nonprofit last year, it is growing rapidly.

Funded by foundations, university partners and the federal government via AmeriCorps, CAC recruits newly-minted college graduates, preferably minorities, and places them in schools where the majority of students are low-income.

At the recent “College Opportunity Day of Action,” Michelle Obama enthused, “School districts are partnering with nonprofits and colleges to provide training for counselors *once they’re in our schools* [emphasis added].” She continued, “Nonprofits are stepping up to improve student-and-counselor ratios and bringing recent graduates into schools to serve as role models and mentors.”

Similar to Teach For America, the new college graduates receive a paltry six weeks of training and are then placed in the most needy schools. In an article largely favorable to CAC, *Education Week* describes the functions of these “near-peer” advisers. “At a corps training session last fall, advisers were encouraged to adapt games, such as Monopoly and Who Wants to be a Millionaire? with questions related to the college search.

“‘To give them 40 minutes of fun, it makes them happy and creates a dialogue for them to come to us when the time is right,’ said Molly Thompson, 23, an adviser at two central Pennsylvania high schools.”

A far cry from “improving the student-and-counselor ratio,” this operation will be used to justify the further elimination of counseling services for students in poor school districts.

The CAC has now branched into 14 states with 470 advisers in 483 high schools. CAC aims to be in 1,000 schools by 2020, according to *Education Week*. Presently, 30 percent of the corps members are funded by AmeriCorps and earn between \$24,000 and \$30,000 a year. After one year, they are entitled to a \$5,600

education credit that can be used to pay down student loans. The median salary of a high school counselor in 2012 was \$53,600.

As an indication of the road ahead and the business possibilities inherent in the program, Bloomberg Philanthropies has recently begun financing an e-advising initiative. The e-advising works in conjunction with CAC, but provides even fewer services—merely a remote phone contact—for students seeking help.

Once more, the Obama administration brings together business interests, foundations and nonprofits to undermine essential services, attack the rights associated with public education, eliminate trained professionals and substitute well-meaning but untrained young people who are themselves being denied the right to a secure and decent job.



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