

Democratic Party candidates posture at union-sponsored education forum

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Seven Democratic presidential candidates participated in an all-day public education forum in Pittsburgh December 14. Six of the seven, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, former Vice President Joe Biden, Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar, Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, billionaire hedge fund manager Tom Steyer and South Bend, Indiana mayor Pete Buttigieg, will also be among the seven candidates allowed to participate in the sixth Democratic primary debate December 19, along with tech entrepreneur Andrew Yang, who skipped the Pittsburgh event.

The seventh participant in Saturday's forum, Colorado Senator Michael Bennet, has almost never polled above 1 percent since announcing his candidacy last March. Bennet is the son of former AID administrator Douglas Bennet, and brother of *New York Times* editorial page director James Bennet. The former head of the Denver public schools was once considered for secretary of education under Barack Obama and was instrumental in implementing Obama's Race to the Top program in Colorado. His participation was doubtless intended as a "reality check" on the promises of greater education spending by the other candidates, none of which any of them plan to implement anyway.

The Saturday forum was sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, Service Employees International Union, American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees and the NAACP along with several "community activist" groups established as front organizations by the Democratic Party and the trade unions.

AFT president Randi Weingarten summed up the true political purpose of the forum in closing remarks to the 1,000 or so in attendance. "What's happened today kind of flipped the script," she said. "For the candidates for presidency of the United States of America to listen to what we actually see from the lens of lived experience. These candidates are listening to us and the community as opposed to the one who's in the White House."

In other words, the purpose of the forum was to have the teachers' union officials prepare for future collaboration

with a Democratic president at the expense of teachers, as was the case under the Obama administration, when Weingarten and other highly paid bureaucrats had "seats at the table" while record cuts were carried out in public education at all levels.

Nearly all the candidates promised to drastically increase funding for public education, promises that they will immediately break should they win the presidency.

Sanders, the so-called "democratic socialist," framed the struggle for better public education in nationalist terms. "Together, we're going to create the strongest best public school system in the world," he said. The senator promised to make sharp cuts to defense funding which would be diverted to the classroom, and promised a minimum nationwide teaching salary of \$60,000.

What Sanders neglected to mention, however—his stated opposition to record defense spending notwithstanding—was that he refused to vote against the record \$738 billion military budget passed by the Senate last August. Among those voting in favor of the budget were representatives Rashida Tlaib and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, members of the Democratic Socialists of America. Ocasio-Cortez officially endorsed Sanders for president in October.

Elizabeth Warren, vying with Sanders for the Democratic Party "progressive" vote, pushed for a limited wealth tax to address deficits in public education spending. "She has taken great pains to posture as the "education candidate" in the Democratic primary. However, along with Sanders and the rest of the nominees, Warren presents the defense of public education as the defense of the teacher unions, even though they are justifiably distrusted or outright despised by the majority of teachers.

In addition to providing support for the trade unions, the participants also presented the struggle for public education in purely racist terms. The fight for public education funding was couched in terms of educational "equity." Rather than initiate a sweeping funding plan for public schools and students throughout the country, Democrats promised instead to reallocate funds to historically

“underserved communities” instead. A Democrat presidential administration will ensure that whatever modest funding increases come about are highly rationed to a small group of school districts.

The promotion of identity politics on Saturday was also used as a back door to rehabilitate the flagging billionaire-led charter school movement, which fell into disfavor after the teacher strikes of 2018 and 2019.

MSNBC journalist and moderator Rahema Ellis strongly pressed Warren on the question of charter schools, which she framed as a racial justice issue. “The majority of children who find themselves in public charter schools are minority children. What do you say to those parents whose children are currently in charter schools,” Ellis asked. Warren responded, “I’m not proposing cutting funding for children who are currently in charter schools.”

Former Vice President Biden promised an investment of \$139 billion over 10 years to invest in the disabilities education act by raising the corporate tax rate. Pete Buttigieg remarked that his parents and husband are school teachers. He promised to allow teacher credentials to be more easily transferrable among states and promised loan forgiveness to teachers who spend more than seven years teaching in Title I schools.

Michael Bennet told the audience that teachers need to be paid more but that the goal of public education should be focused exclusively on job preparedness. “No kid should graduate from high school in America without one year of community college under their belt and without the ability to earn a living wage.”

Klobuchar said that the estate tax redemption should be repealed to fund public education while promising to remove lead paint from older school campuses. Billionaire Tom Steyer noted that it was “ridiculous” to treat education as an expense. He also promised to spend more on Title I schools.

Predictably, the candidates all laid the crisis of education purely at the feet of the Trump administration, which has sought to cut tens of billions from education spending, while deliberately ignoring the instrumental and foundational role of the Democratic party in the school privatization movement.

During the Obama administration, there was a net loss of 300,000 school workers combined with a sharp increase in K-12 enrollment, leading to dangerously overcrowded classrooms, which motivated nearly all school strikes of the past two years.

Along with the sharp drop in school employees under Obama, there was a significant drop in per pupil funding, reaching as high as \$10,000 and \$7,000 per pupil per year in North Carolina and Florida respectively.

Obama’s signature education policy was the Race to the

Top Initiative which promised limited federal grant money to school districts implementing the most favorable privatization policies. These opened the floodgates to private industry, which took advantage of opportunities for private education services and high stakes testing.

The mass teacher strikes of 2018 and 2019, which initially erupted outside of the control of the teacher unions, brought the school privatization movement to a temporary halt.

New Jersey Senator Cory Booker’s last minute withdrawal from the education forum due to illness certainly suggests the political concerns of the Democrats. Of the current presidential candidates, Booker has been the most vocal proponent of charter schools, penning an opinion piece in the *New York Times* last month headlined, “Stop being dogmatic about public charter schools.”

During the last two years of teacher strikes, it has been the teacher unions who betrayed the teachers struggle and reached rotten agreements with district and city officials, both in the statewide strikes like West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, and strikes in major cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, Denver and Oakland. The unions worked quite explicitly to prevent teachers across the country from linking their strikes. Even within individual districts, school staff were prevented from joining teachers on the picket line by SEIU and AFSCME, who co-sponsored Saturday’s event. This only insured that schools remained open, diminishing the power of the teachers’ struggle.

In the case of the AFT and NEA, the outlook of the national teachers unions was summarized by AFT president Weingarten, who tweeted in the midst of the strike of more than 33,000 Los Angeles teachers last January, “This is not about a strike wave—this is a specific fight for the kids & public schools of LA.”

The fight for teacher and student demands and for high quality public education will only be successful to the extent that both break free of the Democratic Party and the trade unions which deliberately act as a political millstone around their necks.



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