

What would a Biden administration mean for public education?

Rena Cassimeda
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“For America’s educators, this is a great day: You’re going to have one of your own in the White House,” announced President-elect Joe Biden in his acceptance speech. Indeed, educators have expressed widespread relief that Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, a lifelong crusader against public education, should be ousted. #ByeBetsy has trended on social media.

But teachers should check their enthusiasm. Biden’s statement could not be more hollow. An understanding of what a Biden administration would have in store for educators requires a sober appraisal of the record of the Obama-Biden administration, the president-elect’s program and the class interests that Biden and the Democratic Party serve.

First of all, Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris have no difference with Trump and Wall Street on herding teachers, students and parents back to school and work. They have insisted that reopening schools “should be a top national priority.”

Democrats and Republicans alike are making every attempt to ensure students are back in classrooms so that parents can be thrust back into workplaces to produce profits for the financial oligarchy. The Democrats and the teachers unions have embraced the lie that schools can be reopened “safely” with a bit more PPE and plastic partitions.

To this end, Biden has suggested the need for \$88 billion in new COVID-19 relief to schools. This is less than half of the amount needed by districts. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) has said an additional \$158.1 billion to \$244.6 billion would be required to reopen school buildings safely and serve all students this year. Biden knows full well that such sums would never be approved by Republicans but has made the proposal to provide a political cover for his full support to a return to in-person schooling.

Secondly, a Biden administration will continue the austerity policies against public education, under conditions of a severe economic crisis. Originally Biden took to the presidential campaign trail with proposals for a series of mild reforms, including a threefold increase to Title I federal funding for low-income schools, universal prekindergarten and greater funding for special education programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). He also proposed “fixing” the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program, support for student mental health, and “hiring more people of color into the Department of Education (ED).”

Aside from the nod to identity politics, these measures were all typical campaign lies. Public education is an unprecedented economic crisis. The Bureau of Labor and Statistics shows that more than 354,000 K-12 and 337,000 higher ed employees have lost their jobs during the pandemic. As a result of the ongoing fiscal downturn, the

Learning Policy Institute (LPI) projects that the nation’s K-12 schools face a cumulative education funding deficit of between \$295 to \$370 billion.

Under these conditions, any new programs or budgetary reforms will be rejected as “unfeasible” in light of Wall Street’s demands for mass austerity and state deficits. In other words, Biden has zero intentions of keeping any of his promises, except for increasing the number of affluent blacks, Hispanics and women in the Department of Education. Instead, there will be a direct policy continuity between the outgoing Trump administration and the incoming Biden administration. The only real difference is that Biden will impose austerity (and it will be greater) under the rhetoric of identity politics and with the collusion of the unions.

What was the Biden record?

Just four years ago, Biden was the vice president in an administration infamous for its deep-going attacks on public education through punitive standardized testing, support for merit pay and other anti-teacher policies, defunding of federal education aid programs and outright support for privatization.

In the aftermath of the 2008 Wall Street crash, the Obama-Biden administration bailed out the banks and big businesses, funneling trillions to the financial elite while eviscerating social programs. This policy resulted in the unprecedented upward transfer of vast sums of money into the pockets of a financial oligarchy, together with a horrific growth of social inequality and poverty. As Biden-Harris take office in 2021, we can expect the same class response, under more severe circumstances.

While teachers thought Obama’s election would mean the end of George Bush’s hated No Child Left Behind scheme, they got the Race to the Top and Every Student Succeeds Act, which expanded the Bush era program of charter schools and privatization on behalf of the powerful edu-business industry.

For her part, Jill Biden toured with then-Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in 2009 promoting Race to the Top and Common Core. By 2010, US school districts faced a combined \$230 billion budget shortfall, resulting in mass cuts impacting public school employees and students. Over 300,000 school employees permanently lost their jobs. Per pupil spending in many districts fell as much as \$1,000 per year. Overall, elementary and high schools cut spending by 37 percent from 2008-2013, and public school infrastructure was left to crumble.

By 2016, after eight years of the Obama-Biden enrollment in charter schools doubled, with 6 percent of public school students attending charter schools, up from about 3 percent.

Starved and grasping for funds, thousands of public schools were forced to compete with each other for federal monies. Federal testing standards were devised which labeled schools in poverty-stricken areas as “failing.” These schools suffered arbitrary shuffling of personnel, and ultimately many were shut down, only to be replaced with for-profit charter businesses, often owned by minority entrepreneurs.

Obama’s final 2016 budget, which received bipartisan support, called for a 50 percent increase in federal support for charter schools. Such attacks set the stage for the further assault on schools by the likes of Trump and DeVos.

Most significantly, Biden’s transition team includes scores of big business foundation names strongly associated with years of school privatization efforts, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies. To give a sense of the business opportunities afoot for the giant tech industry under a future Biden administration, Gates announced a Reimagine Education project for online schooling last May in the New York City schools, just as \$827 million in cuts were announced.

2021 and beyond will bring educators, school workers, parents and students into struggle on a scale not yet seen. Workers will not accept mass death associated with the return to work in unsafe conditions nor the dismantling of public education.

For this reason, Biden is floating as a possible new Secretary of Education either Randi Weingarten, the current president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), or Lily Eskelsen-Garcia, former president of the National Education Association (NEA) from 2014-2020.

It is highly unlikely that Biden would nominate either one of the union executives to fill the post, given his emphasis on picking nominees that would be acceptable to the Republicans, even as they back Trump’s efforts to nullify the election and install himself as presidential dictator.

Nevertheless, the AFT and NEA officials have long proven their usefulness to the corporate and political establishment by suppressing educators’ opposition to savage austerity measures and school privatization schemes.

Both union presidents have endorsed and *enforced* the demand that educators return to the classrooms, despite the growing numbers of teacher and school worker deaths. After thousands of teachers across the country participated in walkouts, demonstrations and protests throughout the spring and summer, setting up independent Facebook groups to oppose the unsafe return to schools, the AFT allowed that they might endorse local “safety strikes.” Without exception, they prevented them and demobilized teachers. This has included districts, such as Detroit, which voted by 91-9 percent to walk out.

Eskelsen Garcia emphasized during the NEA Representative Assembly in July, “The American economy cannot recover if schools can’t reopen.” The AFT issued a document, “A Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities,” demanding that the union partner in reopening plans.

During the major wave of teacher strikes in 2018-2019, Weingarten, Garcia and their respective unions isolated, limited and sabotaged state and local strikes. They ensured that teachers, who were fighting to regain spending losses and layoffs that occurred as a result of the Great Recession and ongoing privatization of schools, did not develop

education to a nationwide strike that would challenge the austerity measures of the Democrats and Republicans and threaten the monopolization of wealth by the capitalist class and the affluent layers like the union executives themselves. (They each make more than \$500,000 annually.)

It is highly significant that one of the potential picks for Treasury Secretary being mentioned is Roger Ferguson, a former Federal Reserve vice president, financial adviser to the Obama administration, who, since 2008, has been the CEO of the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association (TIAA), which manages \$1.3 trillion in teacher pension funds, including those controlled by the AFT and NEA.

Both unions have vast investments in commercial real estate development and financial securities. This gives the unions a direct financial incentive to support austerity and other measures to maintain the relentless rise of the stock market, even as the death toll, including among educators continues to increase. To be blunt, the shortening of the life expectancy of retired teachers will be a positive benefit for the union executives’ investment portfolios, since it will mean smaller outlays for the payment of pension benefits, leaving more money to invest.

Biden and the Democrats, along with the servants in the unions, fear nothing more than a powerful movement of the working class against the corporate and financial oligarchy. That is why they are doing nothing to alert workers to the dangers posed by Trump’s coup threats, presenting his refusal to concede as a “tantrum” rather than a dire threat to core democratic rights.

The fight against this threat and the criminal back-to-school and back-to-work policies of both corporate-controlled parties requires the formation of new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file safety committees, which are independent of the AFT, NEA and other unions and committed to mobilizing the working class to close schools and non-essential industries, while fully compensating the workers, unemployed and small businesses, until the pandemic is under control.

This must be combined with the building of a mass political movement of the working class to fight for socialism, including the transformation of the banks and major corporations into publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities.

The trillions squandered on the greed of the super-rich must be expropriated and used to provide for the social needs of the population and the development of a society based on equality and workers democracy. The Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee urges you to join the fight to mobilize the full strength of the working class to protect our lives, our rights and our future.



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