

Reinventing No Child Left Behind

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Enacted on January 8, 2002, the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act's (NCLB) sponsors claimed it would close the achievement gap between inner city and rural schools and more affluent suburban ones by setting high reading and math standards, then testing to assure they're achieved. However, the law's real aim is to commodify public education, end government responsibility for it, and make it another business profit center.

Renewing NCLB stalled in both houses of Congress for good reason. It's long on testing, school choice, and market-based reforms, but short on real achievement. It's built around rote learning, standardized tests, requiring teachers to teach to the test, assessing results by Average Yearly Progress (AYP) scores, and punishing failure by firing teachers and principals, closing schools, and transforming them from public to charter or for-profit ones.

In other words, it's a thinly veiled scheme to privatize public education, control costs, run schools by marketplace rules, decide what's best for students based on bottom-line considerations, and end a 374 year public education tradition in America.

Obama plans to reinvent a failed policy, give it a new name, and claim it will fix NCLB's shortcomings. On April 14, The New York Times reported that his administration will rewrite the law, toughen standards for teacher quality and student performance, keep testing as a core element, and increase the federal government's control over educating the nation's youths.

Then on July 24, The Education Department announced its \$4.35 billion "Race to the Top" scheme with Obama linking federal funding to compliance with Washington's standards:

"What we're saying here is, if you can't decide to change these practices, we're not going to use precious dollars that we want to see creating better results; we're not going to send those dollars there. And we're counting on the fact that, ultimately, this is an incentive, this is a challenge for people who do want to change."

In fact, it pits one state against others to see which gets most and sacrifices quality education, local autonomy, and the interests of parents and youths doing it.

For months, Education Secretary Arne Duncan has been stumping for the new plan even before it was announced because the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act allocated \$100 billion for education. In a July 24 press release, eligibility, it was explained, depends on complying with federally mandated reforms that include:

— "Adopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace;

- Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals;
- Building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals how they can improve their practices; and
- Turning around our lowest-performing schools.”

ObamaEd, in fact, mandates:

- open-ended switching of public schools to charter or for-profit ones;
- running them by marketplace rules;
- requiring state laws to conform to federal ones;
- linking teacher pay to student achievement as determined by standardized tests that measure rote memory skills, not real learning or preparation for higher education;
- destroying the power of unions;
- putting Washington bureaucrats in charge of undermining states, local school boards, and the right of parents to decide what’s best for their children;
- requiring federal mandates to be followed to qualify for funding;
- like NCLB, standardized tests will be required in spite of critics calling them little more than an endless regimen of test-preparation drills in place of real classroom learning;
- creating a two-tiered, class and income-based system favoring affluent school districts over inner-city ones, effectively denying poor kids an education and a chance for a better future; and
- destroying public education in America to create another business profit center.

Yet, at a July National Education Association meeting, Duncan told teachers “You must be willing to change,” so get in step, go along, or be left out. Obama, stressed the same theme in saying do it or you’re out of the money and perhaps in violation of federal law when Congress enacts one, most likely later this year.

Left out entirely are the interests of millions of parents and children who’ll be victimized by marketplace education if states adopt ObamaEd. If legislation passes, public education will be privatized so corporate interests can cash in at the expense of youths from lower and middle income families, especially ones of color.

National Education Association president Dennis Van Roekel expressed concerns in a prepared statement saying:

“If we continue to focus narrowly on test scores, then students in need of the most support will continue to get more test prep rather than the rich, challenging, engaging education they deserve.” As for judging teachers based on student performance he said: they “should be evaluated on their practice using multiple criteria, not just one,” and that’s what parents, principals, and local school boards are for, not Washington bureaucrats or corporate officials

answering to shareholders and Wall Street analysts.

Assessing Charter v. Public School Performance

Conceptually, charter schools are troublesome in that they're quasi-private, near-autonomous, and may freely choose their students and exclude unwanted ones. Effectively that disadvantages youths with disabilities, from poor neighborhoods, and those less favored because of race, ethnic background, or other disqualifying considerations. Their performance compared to public schools causes more concern.

In a first ever national assessment of charter schools, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) June 2009 report titled "Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States" analyzed their "impacts on more than 70 percent of the students in (US) charter schools."

Results showed 17% provided superior education, half were no different from public schools, and 37% "delivered results that are significantly worse than their students would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools." The challenge "is how to deal constructively" with varying performance levels in deciding on the merits of one approach v. the other. So far, charters fall way short of the promise advocates claim for them.

Around 4700 charter schools operate in 40 states and the District of Columbia, representing the largest alternative and gravest threat to public education. CREDO studied 2403 of them and found 46% had math and reading gains "statistically indistinguishable" from public ones, 17% scored better, and 37% fell way below public school performance.

CREDO concluded that "aggregate charter (school performance isn't) advancing the learning gains of their students as much as traditional public schools. The results are significant in both reading and math, though the effects are small in size." Data obtained is current as of the 2007 - 2008 school year and provide updates on earlier studies.

Arne Duncan - Obama's Point Man in Charge

In 2001, he became CEO of Chicago's public schools (the nation's third largest district after New York and Los Angeles) despite having no educational background. He headed an autocratic Board of Education that:

- closed dozens of public schools in black and Latino neighborhoods;
- replaced them with nearly 100 charter or contract ones, many run by for-profit companies;
- undermined the teachers union;
- fired teachers and principals;
- displaced thousands of disadvantaged youths;
- militarized the city's high schools perhaps more than anywhere else in the county to institutionalize JROTC programs with some schools entirely for military studies;
- fought against desegregating over 300 city schools;

— opposed special education programs; and

— ignored parents' complaints to defend corporate involvement in city schools.

His mandate as Education Secretary is to do for the nation what he did to Chicago:

— control K-12 education in America;

— require states and local school boards to comply with federal mandates;

— destroy public education;

— privatize the nation's schools;

— militarize them to create a stream of future recruits;

— destroy teachers unions and their ability to bargain for better schools, higher pay and benefits for teachers, and tenure for the most qualified;

— educate the well-off, not the poor, disadvantaged, and most youths of color;

— turn education in America into a class and income-based system; and

— shut out opposition voices to advance his reactionary agenda.

Later in the year, a reinvented, renamed NCLB bill will be introduced in Congress, likely passed, and signed into law, advancing the worst of the above measures that will wreck the American dream for millions of disadvantaged youths who'll be sacrificed on the alter of marketplace education.

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