

The Democrats vs. Public Education

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Public education in the United States is under heavy attack. And because a so-called “progressive” President is leading the charge, many education activists have been lulled to sleep while on lookout duty.

Obama recently announced his “race to the top” program to “reform” education. Much like Bush’s No Child Left Behind, Obama’s plan represents progress for education in name only.

In reality, Obama’s plan is to lure cash-starved schools into a “competition” to accept federal funds, with dangerous strings attached. The two most devious conditions are the widespread creation of charter schools and the implementation of teacher merit pay. Both of these items have been long-condemned by progressive educational advocates as well as the majority of the nation’s teachers. If implemented, they would have a destructive effect on public education.

It should be no surprise that charter schools and merit pay are two of the most cherished ideas of Conservative Republican thought. As usual, their motives can be reduced to the following proverb: what is good for big business is good for America. For many of these right-wingers, the very existence of public education — or anything run publicly — is considered “socialism” — their unexplained sworn enemy. Instead, they advocate “market solutions to reform public education,” a profit system where the youth of the rich receive quality educations, the poor receive nothing, while giant corporations rake in billions. Obama is likely to make more progress towards this end than Bush could ever dream.

The reasons that charter schools remain a bedrock for Conservative “education reform” are many. Most importantly, however, is the fact that — aside from eliminating teacher unions — charter schools act as a powerful wedge to break apart public education, allowing new space for corporations to squeeze through. The level of privatization varies from school to charter school, with some being publicly funded and privately administered, to others being explicitly for-profit.

Many non-profit charter schools “contract out” their management to for-profit companies — such as Edison Schools, Chancellor Beacon Academies and Mosaica Education — which treat schools like a typical corporation: costs are cut to boost profits. Thus, revenue rises as materials and resources are reduced, teachers’ salaries are slashed, un-certified teachers are hired — as are unqualified principals — while counseling, psychological services, and extracurricular activities are non-existent. Of course, for the better off, these services are available for the right price.

The fact that the Democrats have completely accepted a long-standing Republican perspective on education represents yet another sharp right-turn for the Democrats.

Although Obama denounced Bush's much-hated No Child Left Behind, the criticism amounted to petty bickering over secondary issues. The only thing that needed changing was the name, because of the connection to Bush. This was confirmed by Joe Williams, executive director of Democrats for Education Reform, who referred to Obama's ideas by saying, "It's like the new Coke. This is a re-branding effort," (Washington Post, June 23, 2009).

Another more alarming example of Obama's rightwing stance on education was his pick for Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, chosen for his presiding over the destruction of Chicago's public schools, themselves a carbon copy of the "restructuring" of New Orleans' schools after hurricane Katrina. In both cases dozens of public schools were shut down, teachers were fired in en masse, and privately-administered charter schools were opened. The living wages teachers once earned were replaced by low-wage, inexperienced, and often uncertified teachers. It is this nightmarish model that Obama wishes to replicate on a nationwide scale.

Teachers would of course be severely affected by such a plan, and should be organizing now if they want to avoid the fate of the Chicago Teachers Union, which was unprepared for the steamrolling dolled out by Obama's new Education Secretary.

Historically, teachers' unions have held a prominent place within the education debate, long having been viewed by Conservatives — and now Democrats — as needing to be crushed. This animosity is based on the understanding— and thus combativeness — that teachers displayed over the ideas of Charter schools and merit pay.

They correctly viewed both as ways to not only undermine public education, but teachers' unions. Merit pay supposedly pays teachers for "performance," which both Obama and Bush agree should be based on a test score. The problem with the simplistic equation between a teacher's merit and a student's test score is that the scores are largely a reflection of the student's home environment as well as class size and school funding, factors beyond the control of the teacher.

The real motive behind merit pay, however, is to destroy both union-won annual wage increases and the union-won rules regarding seniority — one of the cornerstones of a strong union. Merit pay also serves to concentrate power in the hands of the principal who dispenses merit pay. Teachers are reluctant to criticize administrators who control their salaries, and principals routinely abuse this power by rewarding friends and withholding salary increases from critics.

Although teachers reacted strongly against Bush's plans to implement these "reforms," the reaction to Obama's identical plan has been more reserved. Shamefully, the Presidents of both major teachers' unions — the AFT and NEA — attended Obama's recent reform announcements, giving his plan credibility where there should be none. (In a sign of gratitude, Obama thanked them mid-speech for attending.)

During the speech, Obama mentioned the need not only for merit-pay and charter schools, but the possibility that, in a "failing school," all the teachers could be replaced. Of course, this directly contradicts the idea of having a union protected job, a cold reality that the teachers in Chicago had to learn.

Obama also mentioned in his speech how "collective bargaining should be a catalyst to

reform.” This simply means that teachers should voluntarily give away past gains — raises and seniority, etc. — at the bargaining table, instead of making Obama look bad by having to take them back and possibly causing a strike.

While Obama acknowledges that many of these schools fail because they are under-funded, dilapidated, with large classroom sizes, etc. — his only solutions are to blame teachers and build charter schools.

With Obama’s plan comes the direct threat not only to teacher unions, but public education, both are in danger of extinction. All working people have an interest in salvaging both entities, since, if the teachers’ unions are crushed, other unions will be targeted, and if public education falls, many children will simply not be educated.

There are ample resources in the U.S. to have a world-class education system, but not if trillions of dollars continue to flow towards bailing out banks and fighting foreign wars. The Democrats have thus shown that their priorities match the Republicans. Only by organizing outside of the grasp of both parties can real social progress begin.

For teachers, adopting a united and aggressive approach against the implementation of Obama’s reforms is the necessary first step to save their living standard and jobs, along with public education.

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