

Obama's 2012 budget deepens attack on public education

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The proposed fiscal year 2012 federal education budget is an escalation of the Obama administration's war on public education and teachers. The White House is expanding its policy of forcing states to compete for desperately needed funds, insisting that they remove caps on charter schools and attack the living standards and workplace rights of school employees in the name of "cost-effectiveness."

The overall proposed education budget for FY 2012 is \$77.4 billion, including what the White House is celebrating as a "significant increase for K-12 education" and "tough choices," or rather cuts, "to put the Pell Grant program on a sustainable fiscal path." The woefully inadequate increase will be distributed through competitive grants and, as the budget proposal states, to fund collaboration with for-profit businesses.

Highlights of the proposed budget include:

- \$26.8 billion for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which will direct funds to "reform-oriented competitive initiatives," consolidate dozens of programs, and cut programs that do not "demand results." Allocations include \$372 million for charter schools and \$300 million for the Investing in Innovation (i3) program, which rewards partnerships with the private sector.

Thus, the federal government is escalating its program of looting the public treasury to give money to powerful business and "philanthropic" interests that run charter schools. The proposal also continues the unfair use of standardized test scores to determine whether schools are deserving of federal funding.

- The fostering of "productivity" by "encouraging states and districts to enact education reforms that are more cost-effective."

The terms "productivity" and "cost-effective" are code words for the intensified exploitation of teachers and other school employees. States and districts that carry out mass layoffs of school personnel will be rewarded with

funding for these cost-saving measures. Employees who are not laid off will be forced to do more with less, take on work once performed by their colleagues, and cope with larger class sizes.

"Cost effectiveness" is also achieved through school consolidations. Districts desperate to save money close schools and move displaced students into buildings that are already filled to capacity. In cities across the country, teachers work in dangerously overcrowded classrooms, leading not only to impossible teaching conditions, but also an unsafe and unhealthy environment.

- A \$2.5 billion investment in an overhauled teacher-quality formula grant and \$500 million for the Teacher and Leader Innovation Fund. The latter is intended for districts "willing to implement bold approaches to improving the effectiveness of the education workforce in high-need schools by creating the conditions needed to identify, reward, retain, and advance effective teachers, principals, and school leadership teams."

This program encourages schools to hire newer, less expensive teachers, driving better paid, more experienced teachers with seniority rights out of the classroom on the basis of false claims that they are "burnouts." The inclusion of the concept of rewarding "effective" teachers is just another way of promoting merit pay for teachers whose students score well on standardized tests.

- \$600 million for School Improvement, or Turnaround Grants (SIG) "to support the Administration's commitment to helping states and districts turn around our nation's lowest performing schools." This represents a \$54 million dollar increase from 2010 levels.

Turnaround grants are a means to punish schools in the nation's poorest districts for failing to get students to score well on standardized tests. Schools that fall into this category are forced to choose a "turnaround model": fire the principal and half the teaching staff, convert the school to a charter, or simply close. Only after

implementing one of the first two options is the school provided with desperately needed funds to hire staff and purchase resources.

- \$90 million for a “new Advanced Research Projects Agency-Education (ARPA-ED)...that would promote dramatic breakthroughs in educational technology,” such as adaptive online tutors.

This will further the government’s agenda of promoting “cost-effectiveness” through the creation of software that will replace human teachers with online education. It will also be another boondoggle for private businesses.

- The Early Learning Challenge Fund, proposed in 2009, will be rolled into Race to the Top (RTTT) in the amount of \$350 million in competitive grants in 2012. Eligibility requires that states be “ready to take dramatic steps to improve the quality of their early childhood programs,” including the development of uniform standards, a quality rating system, and a system of program review, monitoring and improvement.

Just as in K-12, ECE educators will be forced to “teach to the test,” and program quality will be based on test scores. Programs deemed failing under the flawed constraints of the system will be “reformed.”

- \$150 million for Promise Neighborhoods, an initiative that claims to support community and family services, and “rigorous comprehensive reforms to improve the educational and life outcomes for children and youth in high need communities.” Promise Neighborhoods was inspired by Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone project, touted in the documentary, *Waiting for Superman*. Nearly all Promise Neighborhoods fund charter school start-ups.

Officials of other capitalist governments, who have come to tour Promise Neighborhoods are exuberant over this funding model for poor communities. The far-right government of Hungary, for example, plans to replicate this model in oppressed and discriminated Roma communities in an effort to starve their public schools of funds.

Obama’s 2012 budget claims to help “students with disabilities achieve their full potential.” One important aspect of this is a new \$30 million pilot program—PROMISE—that will “develop and evaluate innovative approaches to improving outcomes of children receiving Supplemental Security Income [SSI] and their families.”

The program will divert public money from social service agencies to private companies that provide cheaper services. The claim that services provided by for-

profit companies will lead to better chances for the disabled to live independently is absurd.

“Pay for Success” is modeled after the UK’s pilot program, Social Impact Bonds, which the British government describes as a means of attracting “private sector investment for interventions that will achieve better outcomes and lower government costs.” The goal of both the US and UK versions is to funnel public tax dollars into the hands of private profiteers, while simultaneously creating the rationale for stripping disabled people of SSI benefits.

The Obama budget will also drastically alter financing for public higher education, including extending competitive funding, imposing rules changes for teacher education programs that will result in the shutting down of education colleges, and enacting major cuts in the Pell Grant program, which provides poor and working class students with financial aid to attend college.

Both major political parties are exploiting the crisis in public education, which has been deliberately created through decades of inadequate funding and punitive policies, in order to privatize America’s school system. In so doing, they reward their campaign contributors in the private sector with opportunities to generate profit by giving them access to public educational funds that were previously outside of their reach.

For decades, Republican administrations have sought to enact draconian “reforms” in public education, but their policies were met with mass public resistance. Now, the Obama administration and the Democratic Party, with the collusion of the trade union apparatus in the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, are successfully enacting these and even more right-wing policies.



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