

The dismantling of public education and Obama's education legacy

Part 1

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Under the Obama administration, public education in America has faced an unremitting assault. Never in the history of the United States has schooling—from kindergarten through college—sustained such massive funding cuts as it has during the last seven-and-a-half years.

It has become national policy to de-fund education claiming there is “no money,” for school improvements and the hiring of more teachers even as the US engages in a massive expansion of military and intelligence funding to escalate its unending wars abroad.

There is symmetry involved: we are witnessing a war on public education waged by the ruling elite. Funds have been drained from classrooms and art, music, foreign languages and gym have become luxuries. Up-to-date textbooks and even qualified teachers are disappearing. Sports and other extra-curricular activities have become “pay for play” among endless miscellaneous fees imposed by public schools on families. There has been a proliferation of highly lucrative for-profit “cyber” schools where children’s education consists of sitting in front a computer at home. Public colleges are poorly funded, increasingly overcrowded and have become the source of a lifetime of debt peonage for those choosing to attend.

Paralleling the ever-escalating growth of social inequality, the once-touted “universal leveler,” public education, has become an openly class-based system.

The financial elite and its political spokesmen—both Democrat and Republican—in the White House, the state legislatures and at the local level—have used the economic crisis from 2008 on as a pretext to transfer vast sums out of social programs including education. In addition to funding military aggression overseas, they have provided huge tax cuts for the wealthy and business opportunities in the for-profit sector at the direct expense of educating the working class. Meanwhile Wall Street stock exchanges, corporate cash hoards, and CEO pay have shot to record highs as the financial aristocracy essentially loots society.

This social counterrevolution has been aided and abetted by the collaboration of the teachers’ unions—the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and their state and local affiliates. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been diverted from union dues to support Obama, and his heir apparent Hillary Clinton.

The AFT supported Obama in both 2008 and 2012 and was the first to officially endorse Clinton. The NEA has likewise thrown tens of millions of dollars behind her Clinton who as first lady in the 1990s supported her husband’s right-wing policy of “school choice,” which paved the way for the expansion of charter schools.

Corralling workers’ opposition behind Democratic Party politicians has been an essential part of the unions’ suppression of the independent struggles by education workers. The AFT and NEA have worked overtime to betray struggles when they threatened to challenge the status quo, as in Chicago 2012 and 2016, or attempt to divert or snuff out resistance, as in the Detroit teacher walkouts of 2016. Ever eager to remain a partner in education “reform” with the capitalist politicians and fully on board with pro-war policies and nationalism, there is no line the unions will not cross in order to retain their dues base and “seat at the table.”

It is no exaggeration to say that public education has been upended nationally as a result. Under Obama, there has been a net loss of 300,000 school workers while K-12 student enrollment has actually increased. It has become routine for states to cut as much as \$1,000 per pupil in a single year from their public schools. In North Carolina and Florida, staggering drops in per-pupil funding have been enacted, from over \$10,000 to some \$7,000 respectively. Such draconian cuts barely make the news.

Obama’s signature education policy, Race To The Top (RTTT), continued but vastly intensified the pro-charter and edu-business agenda of George W. Bush’s No Child Left

Behind act (whose co-sponsor was the liberal Democratic stalwart Edward Kennedy). Charter schools, largely run by for-profit management companies and routinely channeling huge sums to outsourcing business entities, mushroomed under the demands of the federal RTTT competition. The federal government dangled competitive grant money, forcing school districts already reeling from state budget cuts to compete with each other in the race to enact privatization policies. At the same time, hedge fund managers and private investors dove into the education services and high-stakes testing market.

By 2012, 42 out of 50 states passed legislation authorizing charter schools, many allowing teachers without state certification or with “alternate certification.” In general, these new instructors were paid less, had no tenure rights and received substandard health and pension benefits, if any at all. By 2012, the number of charter school students had doubled from their 2007 numbers.

New Orleans was the first city to be entirely chartered, with Detroit now facing the same threat. The city with the highest numbers of charters is Los Angeles, where a reported 100,000 students now attend charters, channeling \$500 million annually out of the public school budgets. LA is followed by New York and Philadelphia. Cleveland has 39 percent of their students in charters and Toledo 29 percent with dozens of other American cities running a hybridized traditional/charter educational system.

Under pressure from RTTT, the states not only enacted the legal modifications to make it far easier for charters to open, in many cases they then imposed substantial portions of charter school operating costs on local districts.

In Pennsylvania, where local school districts must transfer a portion of funds to charters, this has led to the near bankruptcy of both Philadelphia and Chester schools. While Philadelphia operated at a \$70 million deficit between 2008 and 2013, the city’s charter schools ran a surplus of \$117 million. For the 2013-14 school year, the district paid \$146 million in interest, with a structural deficit totaling more than half a billion dollars. The district has closed more than 30 schools and reduced 20 percent of its staff since 2012.

The teachers’ unions not only failed to oppose the exponential growth of for-profit charters, their well-heeled union bureaucrats put a major effort into “organizing” them, turning the charters into dues-collection sources.

Not unsurprisingly, Obama’s final education policy initiative—the Every Student Succeeds Act—includes no meaningful new money for traditional public schools but provides substantial new incentives for charter schools. His 2016 budget called for a 50 percent increase in federal support to charters as well, which received bipartisan support.

As part of its promotion of charters, the US Department of Education and the federally funded AmeriCorps have joined with major big business foundations [Walton, Broad] to pour hundreds of millions of dollars into Teach for America (TFA). TFA is both a beneficiary and a driver of the privatization movement. Students in TFA-run classrooms, however, are consigned to untrained young adults—who generally quit after one or two years—in what has aptly been called the “amateurization” of teaching. The TFA model has been used to successfully undercut teachers’ rights, pay standards and pension benefits.

In another aspect of the criminal destruction of America’s public education system, thousands of school buildings across the country are rotting on their foundations. The scandalous and unsafe conditions of schools in Detroit and the fact that lead piping was poisoning students is just the tip of the iceberg. The average age of school buildings in the US is 44 years old, with many more than twice that age. A recent study calls for \$145 billion per year to bring America’s K-12 public school facilities up to code, a sum that is not even remotely being considered.

Elementary and high schools have, in fact, cut capital spending by 37 percent between 2008 and 2013, with a total of 38 states cutting spending. Nevada, for example, cut capital spending by a massive 81 percent. Some states, such as Michigan and 11 others, provide absolutely no support for capital construction. Moreover, the federal government does not provide support for school building or maintenance. This requires hard-hit localities to fund their school buildings through supplemental property tax levies.

Scandalously, public schools have increasingly become of the objects of charities, GoFundMe campaigns and big business philanthropies.



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