

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## Mr. Obama: Most Schools Aren't Like Your Daughters' School

### I want to send my grandson to Sidwell

By Alan C. Jones

At the beginning of this school year, I accompanied my daughter in her search to find a good public school for my grandson. Because of my lifelong career in education—teacher, principal, professor of education—my daughter felt that I was well qualified to help her with the search. In her words: "Dad, you'll know the right questions to ask."

She was wrong.

Nothing could have prepared me for the mindlessness of the hallways, classrooms, and main offices I observed in the coming weeks. I reviewed curriculum with no art or music and only sporadic attempts at teaching science. I followed a school schedule heavily focused on basic literacy skills. I found kindergarten programs with no recess. I observed classrooms where students were required to repeat state standards written on the chalkboard and spend hours completing mountains of worksheets designed to make children more test-savvy.

There were breaks in the day that amounted to forced marches to and from bathrooms. Following these brief breaks, students were led back to classrooms for timed tests, test-preparation games, and the distribution of awards for those who met the state standard for the day.

The schooling landscape worsened when I questioned administrators and teachers about their schools' instructional programs. What I heard was a form of pseudo-educational jargon that made no sense. The new foreign language of schooling was an incomprehensible mix of educational alphabet soup (RTI, ELL, AYP, LD, BD, ADHD), business metaphors (data-driven, performance-based, TGM), and an urgent plea for more time to prepare students for the state test in March. Nowhere in these conversations did I discern sensitivity to the developmental needs of a kindergartner or an instructional program that would develop the habits of thought valued in a global economy.

In the midst of this march through the school wastelands of No Child Left

**"When President Obama talks about good schools, he is talking about schools for other people's children,**

Behind and Race to the Top, I saw a picture of President Barack Obama and **not his own.** first lady Michelle Obama visiting the Sidwell Friends School, the private school in Washington that their daughters attend. Worn out by what I was observing in schools in my community, I wondered what kind of school the president's children attended.

A Google search brought into focus an instructional program that was comparable to that of the famed University of Chicago Laboratory Schools founded by John Dewey and previously attended by the Obama daughters. Sidwell students, it seemed, experienced an instructional program that allocated appropriate time for each discipline to be taught well; engaged in instructional activities that were problem-based and interdisciplinary; participated in a rich extracurricular program; and were supervised by administrators and teachers who place children's social and emotional development on an equal footing with their intellectual growth. I saw no mention of test scores, adequate yearly progress, or data-driven instruction. In contrast to the schools my daughter and I visited, it appeared that the administrators and teachers at Sidwell assumed that, if their school provided a high-quality instructional program, the test scores would take care of themselves.

As I studied **Sidwell's Web page**, I was overcome with the irony of our highest government official sending his children to a school with an instructional philosophy diametrically opposed to his administration's official position on what constitutes a good school.

I wondered how long Mrs. Obama would tolerate her daughters' attendance at a school that U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan identified as "racing to the top." Too often, the same public officials who send their children to schools that educate the whole child mandate that my grandson attend a school that educates one-quarter of my grandson. (To be fair, I should note that Duncan sends his own children to public school in Virginia.)

The outcome of my journey into schools that were racing to the top was finding a school where my grandson would, at least, be exposed to a fraction of the instructional program the president's children experience each day. My daughter has compensated for the educational gaps in my grandson's schooling by regular visits to educational venues of all kinds (museums, art galleries, plays) and vacations that include an educational goal that replicates the experiences at Sidwell.

Under this new government-driven regime of testing and accountability, schools are no longer the schools I attended, taught in, or led. This new breed of accountability-driven schools is more interested in reaching some number at the end of the school year than with my grandson's deep—and untestable—need to be known, respected, and educated. While these goals are still pursued at Sidwell, they no longer exist in schools that are focused on AYP and reaching the top. When President Obama talks about good schools, he is talking about schools for other people's children, not his own.

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*Alan C. Jones is a principal-mentor and an education consultant. He was a principal from 1985 to 2001 and an assistant principal and teacher in the two decades before that. He also served as an associate professor of school administration at Saint Xavier University, in Chicago, from 2002 to 2012. He lives in Burr Ridge, Ill.*