

Obama's education gap: Rhetoric vs policies

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: September 12, 2013

There is a big gap between what President Obama says about educational equity and the consequences of his policies. Here's a post on this by Arthur H. Camins, director of the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. His writing can be found [at his website](#).

By Arthur H. Camins

How did we get here?

President Barack Obama has pursued, continued or tacitly accepted education policies that either exacerbate inequity or simply miss the mark. These include:

- Tying federal funds to states and localities to their use of assessments of national "college and career readiness" standards;
- Quasi-privatization of public schools through expansion of charter schools;
- Revamping evaluation systems to link individual teacher's salary and employment status to student test scores;
- Promotion of short-term alternate teacher certification and staffing programs;
- Removal of principals and 50% of teachers in low-performing schools.

These are the essential components of massive federal programs such as the School Improvement Grants and Race to the Top. They have a scant evidentiary basis.

How did we get here? Why does the president promote these policies? Why has critique fallen on deaf ears within his administration?

Opponents of current education policies have tended to focus criticism on the secretary of education, Arne Duncan, and on the influence of hedge fund managers, wealthy foundations and publishing conglomerates. This tends to cast the president as somewhat naïve or out of touch. I give him more credit than that. I assume that the president is well aware of the content of criticism of his policies and that he is fully in charge of his administration's education policy direction. I assume that the president has some philosophical affinity with his advisors. The president appears to believe in the traditionally conservative notion that government cannot be independently effective, but must be augmented by private market forces and public-private partnerships. Maybe that is why he never strongly supported single-payer universal health coverage. Maybe that is why he has abetted the outsized influence of large foundations in staffing the U.S. Department of Education and why he supports charter schools.

On the surface, the chasm between President Obama's soaring rhetoric and the reality of his education policies is wide. In his [speech](#) commemorating the 50th anniversary of the historic 1963 civil rights March for Jobs and Freedom, he said:

The test was not and never has been whether the doors of opportunity are cracked a bit wider for a few. It was whether our economic system provides a fair shot for the many, for the black custodian and the white steelworker, the immigrant dishwasher and the Native American veteran. To win that battle, to answer that call — this remains our great-unfinished business.

The president believes that education is a cornerstone of that "fair shot." However, his ideal of equity cannot be reconciled with his education policies that are driven by competition — between parents for schools, between schools for students and between teachers for merit pay increases. These competitions — as in most games — result in a few winners and many losers, not equity. The explanation may be that while his education policies have the appearance of equity cloth, they may upon close inspection be woven from threads that yield a very different kind of fabric.

Closer examination of the president's words is revealing. Talking about education in a July 24 [economics speech at Knox College](#), he declared:

Here in America, we've never guaranteed success — that's not what we do. More than some other countries, we expect people to be self-reliant. Nobody is going to do something for you. We've tolerated a little more inequality for the sake of a more dynamic, more adaptable economy. That's all for the good. But that idea has always been combined with a commitment to equality of opportunity to upward mobility — the idea that no matter how poor you started, if you're willing to work hard and discipline yourself and defer gratification, you can make it, too. That's the American idea.

I take the president's passion for equity at face value. But, it appears that the president believes that it is the absence of a *willingness to work hard* that is undermining educational success and that this failure will only be turned around by competition.

Trying to explain the contributing factors to our limited progress toward jobs and justice, Obama [said](#):

And what had once been a call for equality of opportunity, the chance for all Americans to work hard and get ahead was too often framed as a mere desire for government support, as if we had no agency in our own liberation, as if poverty was an excuse for not raising your child and the bigotry of others was reason to give up on yourself.

Certainly working hard is an essential ingredient for success, however, the president's approach to addressing inequity in education flawed in three significant ways.

First, individuals are driven to work hard and persist through challenging tasks by self-confidence and a sense of purpose larger than themselves, not extrinsic reward. Students fail to work hard when they come to believe that their ability to be successful is fixed rather than malleable — or, as they grow older, a perception that the deck is so stacked against them that no amount of hard work would make a difference. Persistent unemployment, low wage jobs and growing income inequality serve to reinforce these perceptions. Educational focus on results over effort and on rewarding final results over learning from error tends support fixed rather than a growth mindset. This undermines rather than catalyzing hard work.

Second, there is no evidence that a substantial percentage of U.S. teachers are withholding effort or that incentives lead to more effective effort. On the other hand, there is evidence that reward systems incentivize teachers to work against rather than with each other. This doesn't lead to working smarter but rather promotes individual teacher concerns rather than collective student concerns and constrains rather than supports learning from one another.

Third, competition for students among schools privileges students from more educated and stable families, exacerbating rather than ameliorating inequity by further isolating students most in need of support. In the absence of massive investment in non-academic and social supports for children and their families that might mediate class-based ready-to-learn disparities, students are punished for their parents' educational and economic standing.

The president's call to address the unfinished business of inequity has no greater urgency than in education. Five decades after the historic civil rights march, race and socio-economic status still remain persistently reliable predictors of educational success. [There are more powerful](#) policy levers that the competition and market-based ones the president has chosen.

So how did we get here? One explanation for the presidents' policy choices is his belief system. Another explanation is that we keep electing people who share his beliefs — perhaps without even realizing it. Our great educational failure is not that U.S. students' test scores are not “first in the world.” Rather, it is that we have failed to raise enough critical thinkers. There is no research data upon which I make that claim. Instead, I take as evidence that we continue to elect leaders without the integrity or vision to answer the president's own call: [“The arc of the moral universe may bend towards justice, but it doesn't bend on its own.”](#) We continue to permit leaders to make false claims without being held accountable.

To do so, we need to raise a new generation of young idealists with the hope, drive and courage to demand justice, to be the force bending the arc.

We need to create citizen pressure to elect politicians and choose educational leaders who are more concerned with raising the next generation of arc benders than successful test takers. We need to elect and select leaders who believe that integrated schools and neighborhoods, effective government and mediating the effects of poverty are worthy policy goals for the future, not naïve relics of the past.

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