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## Obama's War on Schools

***The No Child Left Behind Act has been deadly to public education. So why has the president embraced it?***

by [Diane Ravitch](#) March 20, 2011



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Obama has made only cosmetic changes to George W. Bush's signature education crusade.

Over the past year, I have traveled the nation speaking to nearly 100,000 educators, parents, and school-board members. No matter the city, state, or region, those who know schools best are frightened for the future of public education. They see no one in a position of leadership who understands the damage being done to their schools by federal policies.

They feel keenly betrayed by President Obama. Most voted for him, hoping he would reverse the ruinous No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of George W. Bush. But Obama has not sought to turn back NCLB. His own approach, called Race to the Top, is even more punitive than NCLB. And though over the past week the president has repeatedly called on Congress to amend the law, his proposed reforms are largely cosmetic and would leave the worst aspects of NCLB intact.

The theory behind NCLB was that schools would improve dramatically if every child in grades 3 to 8 were tested every year and the results made public. Texas did exactly this, and advocates claimed it had seen remarkable results: test scores went up, the achievement gap between students of different races was closing, and graduation rates rose. At the time, a few scholars questioned the claims of a "Texas miracle," but Congress didn't listen.



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## America's Best High Schools: The Top 20

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In fact, the “Texas miracle” never happened. On federal tests, the state’s reading scores for eighth-grade students were flat from 1998 to 2009. And just weeks ago, former first lady Barbara Bush wrote an opinion piece in the *Houston Chronicle* opposing education budget cuts on the grounds that Texas students ranked in the bottom 10 percent in math and literacy nationally. After two decades of testing and accountability, Texas students have certainly not experienced a miracle when judged by the very measures that were foisted on students across the nation.

NCLB mandated that 100 percent of students be proficient in reading and math by 2014. Any school not on track to meet this utopian goal—one never reached by any nation in the world—would face a series of sanctions, culminating in the firing of the staff and the closing of the school. As 2014 nears, tens of thousands of schools have been stigmatized as failures, thousands of educators have been fired, and schools that were once the anchors of their communities are closing, replaced in many cases by privately managed schools. NCLB turns out to be a timetable for the destruction of public education.

Because of the punitive character of the federal law, educators struggle to meet their testing targets. Many districts have reduced time for the arts, history, science, civics, foreign languages, physical education, literature, and geography. They devote more time to preparing students for the state tests in basic skills, which will determine the life or death of their schools. Some districts, such as Atlanta, have experienced cheating scandals. Some states, such as New York, lowered the passing mark on their tests to increase the number of students who were allegedly proficient.

Standardized-test scores can provide useful information about how students are doing. But as soon as the scores are tied to firing staff, giving bonuses, and closing schools, the measures become the goal of education, rather than an indicator.

So now come President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan with their Race to the Top program. The administration invited the states to compete for \$4.3 billion in a time of fiscal distress. To qualify, states had to agree to evaluate teachers by student test scores, to award bonuses to teachers based on student scores, to permit more privately managed charter schools, and to “turn around” low-performing schools by such methods as firing the staffs and closing the schools.

Race to the Top went even beyond NCLB in its reliance on test scores as the ultimate measure of educational quality. It asserts that teachers alone—not students or families or economic status—are wholly responsible for whether test scores go up or down. Now teachers rightly feel scape-goated for conditions that are often beyond their control. They know that if students don't come to school regularly, if they are chronically ill, if they are homeless or hungry, their test scores will suffer. But teachers alone are accountable.

The Obama agenda for testing, accountability, and choice bears an uncanny resemblance to the Republican agenda of the past 30 years, but with one significant difference. Republicans have traditionally been wary of federal control of the schools. Duncan, however, relishes the opportunity to promote his policies with the financial heft of the federal government.

The confluence between the Obama agenda and the Republican agenda became clear in the fall of 2009, when Duncan traveled the country with Newt Gingrich to promote Race to the Top. And on March 5 of this year, President Obama flew to Florida to celebrate the test-score gains at a high school in Miami with former governor Jeb Bush, one of the nation's most vocal proponents of conservative approaches to education reform.

In his recent State of the Union address, Obama rightly asserted that we must encourage innovation, imagination, and creativity so we can "win the future." But the federal government's emphasis on standardized tests subverts that lofty goal. Drilling children on how to take tests discourages innovation and creativity, punishes divergent thinking, and prioritizes skills over knowledge. And the endless hours devoted to test preparation certainly deaden students' interest in school.

Emboldened by the Obama administration, as well as by hundreds of millions of dollars from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, many districts and states now plan to use test scores to evaluate teachers. Most of our nation's leading testing experts think this is a risky path.

Teachers see these measures as an attack on their profession. Recently elected governors such as Scott Walker in Wisconsin and John Kasich in Ohio are ratcheting up the attack, pushing hard to end teachers' collective-bargaining rights, while Mayor Michael Bloomberg in New York City, Gov. Chris Christie in New Jersey, and Gov. Rick Scott in Florida would like to eliminate seniority and due-process rights for teachers. Destroying the unions will silence the only organized voice that opposes draconian cuts to education budgets. Without that voice, schools can expect larger class sizes and reduced funding for the arts, school nurses, libraries, and other programs.

Many of our nation's top teachers—some with National Board Certification—are so disgusted by the attacks on public education that they are planning a march on Washington in July. They plan to demand equitable funding for all public schools, an end to using test scores to punish schools and teachers, and involvement of parents and teachers in the decisions that affect their schools.

The only question is whether President Obama, Secretary Duncan, and Congress will hear their message about what's best for our children—and best for our country.

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