

Unions Criticize Obama's School Proposals as 'Bush III'

By Nick Anderson
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To the surprise of many educators who campaigned last year for change in the White House, the Obama administration's first recipe for school reform relies heavily on Bush-era ingredients and adds others that make unions gag.

Standardized testing, school accountability, performance pay, charter schools -- all are integral to President Obama's \$4.35 billion "Race to the Top" grant competition to spur innovation. None is a typical Democratic crowd-pleaser.

Labor leaders, parsing the Education Department's fine print, call the proposal little more than a dressed-up version of the [No Child Left Behind](#) law enacted seven years ago under Obama's Republican predecessor.

"It looks like the only strategies they have are charter schools and measurement," said Randi Weingarten, president of the [American Federation of Teachers](#). "That's Bush III." Weingarten, who praises Obama for massive federal aid to help schools through the recession, said her 1.4 million-member union is engaged in "a constructive but tart dialogue" with the administration about reform.

Debate over Race to the Top among Democrats, education groups and others is widespread, with thousands of written comments pouring into the government since late July. It previews the clash to come when Obama and the Democratic-led Congress update [No Child Left Behind](#). The controversial law is certain to be renamed and reworked. But those who want to scrap it entirely might be disappointed because federal education policy has been largely bipartisan for the past two decades.

"Obama's the fourth president in a row who has been in favor of standards-based reform and test-driven accountability," said Jack Jennings, a former Democratic congressional aide and president of the [Center on Education Policy](#). "Obama's very much in a line of four consecutive presidents -- two liberals, two conservatives; two Democrats and two Republicans -- who are all in favor of the same kind of reform."

On Thursday, Education Secretary Arne Duncan told interest groups in Washington that the administration hopes to improve the 2002 federal law by raising expectations for students, giving schools more flexibility and tracking classroom gains rather than how far test scores fall short of what he called "utopian goals."

But Duncan reiterated his commitment to testing and accountability: "I will always give NCLB credit for exposing achievement gaps and for requiring that we measure our efforts to improve education by looking at outcomes rather than inputs. . . . Today, we expect districts, principals and teachers to take responsibility for the academic performance of their schools and students."

The standardized testing culture has sunk deep roots in public education under the federal mandate to assess students in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school. State tests are widely criticized for uneven rigor and quality, but they provide data crucial to many reform efforts. The administration has set aside funding to help develop a new generation of exams as a group of states seeks to write what could become the first nationwide academic standards. But for now, the regular state tests will feed into Race to the Top.

The administration's proposed rules for the grants challenge the education establishment on [several fronts](#):

- To create systems to track individual student achievement over time and link growth in scores to individual teachers and principals;
- To use those data in part to evaluate and compensate teachers

and principals;

-- To lift limits on independently operated but publicly funded charter schools, which usually are not unionized; and

-- To shake up perennially struggling schools identified through No Child Left Behind.

The proposal could be revised this fall before states apply. No money has been awarded yet. Still, details embedded within the proposal have sent shock waves through the education world.

For example, it defines an "effective teacher" as one "whose students achieve acceptable rates (e.g., at least one grade level in an academic year) of student growth" -- and it requires such growth to be measured through state test scores when applicable. To revive struggling schools, including many Duncan calls "dropout factories," the proposal urges states to sweep out their staff or management, convert them to charter schools or close them entirely, with a fourth option of "school transformation" recommended only when the more aggressive strategies "are not possible." And the proposal declares ineligible for funding any state that prohibits the linkage of student achievement data to teachers and principals for job evaluations.

California might soon repeal a statute that appears to run afoul of that provision. It is one of several states that have in recent months passed or proposed measures to position themselves to secure grants.

The comments on Race to the Top -- more than 3,700 in all, from more than 1,100 sources, according to a government official -- range from scathing to enthusiastic.

The [National Education Association](#), with 3.2 million members, called it a "disturbing" federal intrusion. "We have been down that road before with the failures of No Child Left Behind," the union writes, "and we cannot support yet another layer of federal mandates that have little or no research base of success and that usurp state and local government's responsibilities for public

education." Union affiliates from 19 states weighed in, many echoing such views.

The National School Boards Association declared itself generally supportive but worried that the program is "overly prescriptive," with an "overemphasis on charter schools and school takeovers."

Virginia gubernatorial candidate Robert F. McDonnell (R) commended the administration's push for performance pay and charter schools. "Education reform is not a partisan issue," he wrote in a letter to Duncan last month.

In a joint statement, the Center for American Progress, Democrats for Education Reform, the Education Equality Project and the Education Trust called the proposal "a strong and good-faith effort" to fix education problems.

"There hasn't been enough focus by those on the left on innovation and entrepreneurship. It's ironic because it's those traits of America that have pushed this country into world leadership," Cynthia G. Brown of the Center for American Progress said in an interview. Said Brown, who was an assistant education secretary in the Carter administration: "We have to move forward and try some new ways of doing things. We need to do it in partnership with those who teach in our classrooms and those who govern our schools. But we've got to move forward."

Duncan said Thursday that he is prohibited from responding to all of the Race to the Top input as the government prepares its rules. "Great feedback," he called it.