By Michael W. Apple
Illustration by Pep Montserrat

Grading Obama's Education Policy

FOR THOSE OF US WHO slogged through the years of No Child Left Behind and its damaging effects on education, Barack Obama's election promised what we hoped was a major shift in educational policies. The threat of privatization would no longer hang over schools. Curricula would no longer be simply made up of low-level facts to be mastered for seemingly mindless tests. Teachers would no longer have to spend weeks doing nothing but test preparation with their students. Poor children of color would no longer be so overrepresented in special education classes, shunted there as an excuse for not dealing with the realities of racism in the larger society. Schools would finally get the resources they needed to try to compensate for the loss of jobs, ever increasing impoverishment, lack of health care, massive rates of

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incarceration, and loss of hope in the communities that they served. A richer and more vital vision of education would replace the eviscerated vision of education that now reigned supreme.

Ah yes, all would change. And even if all did not change, we would see vastly different approaches to education than those that had dominated the Bush years.

Some things have changed. But much still remains the same. Obama's signature education initiative, the Race to the Top, includes some partly progressive elements and intuitions. For instance, schools will be given more credit for raising student achievement, even if a school's average scores do not meet the goals of adequate yearly progress. The culture of shaming schools has been lessened. There is no longer a hidden agenda of privatizing all of our major public institutions. These changes should not be dismissed.

But even with this more flexible approach, Race to the Top continues some of the same tendencies that made No Child Left Behind so deeply problematic. We still have corporate-style accountability procedures, the employment of divisive market mechanisms, the closing of schools, an uncritical approach to what counts as important curricular knowledge, the weakening of teachers' unions, and strong mayoral control of school systems.

The policies advocated by Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan aren't as aggressive as before. They don't see schools as simply factories producing workers and profits. But overall, these policies still bear some of the hallmarks of the neoliberal agenda that has been pushed on schools for years. Competition eats cooperation. Nationalist rhetoric dominates as well.

Throughout the last decade, we repeatedly were told that public is necessarily bad and private is necessarily good. Powerful groups argued that the more that schools mirror the goals and procedures of the corporate sector, the more that we hold teachers' and schools' feet to the fire of competition, the better they will be. These arguments are almost religious, since they seem to be nearly impervious to empirical evidence.

Even such a stalwart supporter of these policies as Diane Ravitch has finally concluded that none of these measures will lead to more democratic, substantive, and high quality education. But the criticisms of these kinds of "reforms" have not made it any easier for states to resist them. States and school districts face a serious economic crisis, so federal stimulus dollars tempt them to engage in these problematic reforms, a key part of Race to the Top.

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In Obama's plan, competition will still be sponsored. But rather than an emphasis on vouchers and privatization—the ultimate goal of many on the right during the Bush years—the focus is on charter schools. Choice will largely be limited to the public sector. This is clearly an improvement over the ways in which public institutions and public workers were vilified during the Bush years.

However, the research on charter schools shows that their results are mixed at best. While some good charter schools flourish, charter schools as a whole have often fared worse than regular public schools. And they seem to be even more racially segregated than regular public schools.

But unlike a number of other progressive commentators who have been quite critical of nearly all of the major aspects of Obama's educational policies, I believe that our criticisms need to be a bit more subtle and open.

For me, there is a complex politics surrounding larger issues of race at work here. The reality that a very large proportion of black and brown children face in schools is not pretty, to say the least. We should never romanticize what is happening to all too many children of color in our public schools. Many parents of black children will understandably do anything they can to save their children's future.

Because of this distressing reality, Obama's commitment to choice can be read as partly a critique of dominance. When so much of the media and other aspects of popular culture and mainstream discourse treat African Americans as criminals, as out of control, and basically as not fully rational, choice plans do offer something different. By appropriating a new public identity, an identity that resoundingly says one is a rational economic actor who can make rational choices, people of color are saying that the usual stereotypes about them are both reprehensible and wrong.

Yet, understanding some of the reasons behind Obama's policies

doesn't necessarily mean that we should agree with all of his concrete educational proposals, including his embrace of competitive models.

Take performance pay for individual teachers. Teachers' pay is to be linked to test results. Are there teachers who are ineffective and who need help? Undoubtedly. Is this the best way to judge the immensely complicated job of teaching? No. And given the well-known technical problems of judging teachers' work in more complicated ways, I have very few doubts that student scores on standardized achievement tests will be the norm.

The situation is made worse by the large amount of criticism that the rightwing media have made of teachers, something that is deeply disrespectful of how hard it is to teach in schools now. This combination is a formula for even more of an emphasis on simply teaching for the tests.

I do not doubt either President Obama's or Secretary Duncan's concern for improving achievement, especially for the least advantaged members of our society. But good intentions do not guarantee worthwhile outcomes. Indeed, this is one of those times when the opposite will probably be the result: even more uncreative curricula and teaching, ever more testing and more emphasis on it, and increasingly alienated students and teachers.

Are there alternatives to these kinds of policies? Here the answer is yes. James Beane and I offer in our recent book, *Democratic Schools*, powerful examples of public schools that work. We tell the stories of an array of real public schools in places as diverse as Boston, Chicago, Madison, Milwaukee, and New York. These are schools where expectations and standards are high, where students achieve, where poor and minority students are not pushed out, where teachers have created substantive and serious curricula, and where both students and the local communities are deeply involved in the life of the school.

Take Fratney Elementary School in Milwaukee. Eschewing the never-ending pressure to teach only those things that can be easily tested, the school took a different path. The teachers and administrators engaged in close consultations with the multiethnic community served by the school. Together, they discussed the goals and curriculum of the school. They connected the curriculum to the culture of the students and the problems of the community. In a situation where half of the students spoke Spanish and the other half English, they established a two-way bilingual program in which all subjects for all students were taught in Spanish for a period of time and then in English for the next period of time. The aim was to make all students bilingual and to interrupt the all too common results that have Spanish-speaking children falling further and further behind the longer they stay in school.

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We also have much to learn from other nations. Many people point to what has been done in Finland to reduce the achievement gap. We do have something of importance to learn from these policies, including much more support and professional education for teachers, less emphasis on tracking and standardized testing, more creative curricula, and an emphasis on higher levels of thinking.

But I also think that we have much to learn from the nations of the global South. One of the best examples can be found in Porto Alegre, Brazil. There, you actually have a Citizen School and "participatory budgeting." The curricula are closely linked to the lives and cultures of children and communities, and all people affected by school policies and programs are able to become deeply involved in making decisions about them.

These examples put into practice three insights of the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. First, that an education worthy of its name must begin in critical dialogue. Second, that a school should serve as a site both for community mobilization and transformation. And third, that schools should create citizens who can fully participate in building a society that responds to the best in us. These insights are hard to find in the top down policies being advocated in Race to the Top.

I take the position of being an optimist with no illusions. These are difficult times, but a large number of educators and activists in the United States and elsewhere are deeply committed to both defending and building policies and practices that expand the sphere of democratic and critical dialogue and keep emancipatory educational possibilities alive. This remains our homework. ◆

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