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Commentary: Obama gets inflated grade on education reform

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Even as President Barack Obama's approval ratings continue to slide, folks of all political persuasions are singing his praises on education -- though he has done little of substance.

In a speech last Wednesday, Obama lamented that "people have seen schools as sort of a political spoil having to do with jobs" and declared that "we are putting our resources behind the kinds of reforms that are going to make a difference."

What "reforms" was he talking about? The ones states are encouraged to make to get part of the \$4.35-billion "Race to the Top" Fund, a kitty of stimulus cash controlled by the U.S. secretary of education, for which official guidelines were announced this week.

To compete, the administration has said states must end prohibitions on using student achievement data to evaluate teachers. They should also eliminate caps on charter schools, adopt "internationally benchmarked" curricular standards and prepare to "turn around" bad schools.

It's these seemingly tough stipulations that have education reformers on both the left and right applauding. Even former House Speaker Newt Gingrich called Obama "courageous" for taking these positions.

The only problem is, there's no there there.

Consider teacher evaluations. While states are being told they can't prohibit the use of achievement data in evaluating teachers, there's nothing pushing schools to go ahead and actually use the data. But shouldn't that be the ultimate goal? Of course, but it's also what teacher unions really want to avoid, so Race to the Top avoids it, too.

How about lifting charter caps? It's certainly a good idea, but a lot more than that goes into getting good charter schools. Unfortunately, points out Jeanne Allen, president of the charter-advocating Center for Education Reform, "the president and his education secretary are...giving states credit for talking about charter schools rather than actually changing laws to improve the likelihood that children will have real school choice."

So Race to the Top is great talk but little substance. But at least it isn't making matters worse. The same can't be said for the one substantive thing that Obama has done in education: Deliver a gargantuan \$100 billion in direct stimulus to schools.

The stated rationale for doing this was to save schools from financial devastation, including deep cuts to the most fundamental educational functions. But few public schools were likely facing such a dire scenario.

According to the most recent federal data, inflation-adjusted, per-pupil expenditures in public schools nearly doubled between the 1975-76 and 2005-06 school years. Similarly, in 1990 there were 9.2 students per public-school employee. By 2006 there were only 8.

The schools have been anything but starving. They've also been anything but improving: According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress -- the so-called "nation's report card"--academic outcomes have stagnated since the 1970s.

The situation in higher education is no different. Obama's announced goal for the United States is to have the world's highest proportion of college graduates by 2020. This has translated into colleges getting their own part of the stimulus windfall, as well as creation of the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act, a bill that would funnel yet more money into tuition-inflating student aid and other bankrupting federal programs.

Like K-12 resources, the evidence shows that we already push college too much, not too little.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 25 percent of all jobs in 2006 required at least a bachelor's degree, but as of March 2007 roughly 29 percent of Americans had one. And most new jobs in the coming years will require not a college education, but on-the-job training.

But don't we have to keep up with the Chinese? Hardly. China has certainly been pushing higher education, but to its detriment. According to a September report from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China has such a glut of degree holders that college grads are earning wages on par with migrant workers.

There's no valid reason to emulate that.

Okay, there's one, and it's been serving Obama well since his campaign: Talking about great education--but doing little to actually get it--appears to be a surefire political winner. But that's hardly change we should believe in.

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