

THE OBAMA WATCH

School Choice Even Obama Supports

By [RiShawn Biddle](#) on 10.9.09 @ 6:08AM

As a presidential aspirant last year, Barack Obama gained the support of the National Education Association -- and the scorn of school choice activists -- when he declared his skepticism of the school choice and accountability measures in the No Child Left Behind Act. Then in the early months of this year, the newly-elected president further pleased teachers unions when he tacitly allowed congressional Democrats to shutter the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Plan, the school voucher program that helps 1,716 Washington students attend private schools -- even though he avoided sending his own children to D.C.'s abysmal public schools.

Declared Cato Institute Director Andrew Coulson this past May in the *Washington Post*: "[Obama] has sacrificed a program he knows to be efficient and successful in order to appease the public school employee unions."

But these days, it's been the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers that have been spitting mad, while school choice supporters have reasons to smile. Why? Because Obama and his Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, are using federal stimulus funds and their respective bully pulpits to force states into spurring the growth of public charter schools, the government-funded-yet-privately-operated schools that are the nation's most prominent and successful version of choice. And proving the adage that money talks, cash-hungry states are scaling back or eliminating restrictions on the growth of charter schools in order to qualify for the money.

Teachers unions, who expected more from Obama, feel betrayed. Complains AFT President Randi Weingarten: "It looks like the only strategies they have are charter schools... That's Bush III."

It is just another sign that teachers unions can no longer count on Democrats for unquestioned support. Advancing high-quality alternatives to woeful traditional public schools has become as important to the big-city mayors and civil rights groups as it is to fundamentalist Christian families and single urban mothers. And though many Republicans and conservative elements of the school reform movement may decry the tactics as either federal overreach gone amuck or support for a concept inferior to vouchers, Obama and Duncan may actually achieve the school choice they have unsuccessfully sought for so long.

The expansion of charter schools comes courtesy of a series of legislative afterthoughts in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Better known in school policy circles as Race to the

Top, the sections set aside \$4 billion in federal stimulus funding (along with another \$6 billion in this year's federal budget) to support state initiatives aimed at improving student achievement.

Using the wide sway given to him under the law -- and befitting the school reform reputation he gained during his seven years overseeing Chicago's public schools -- Duncan has issued guidelines that restricts Race to the Top funding to states that have aggressively implemented strict accountability measures, enacted measures to turn around (or shut down) failing schools and allow student test scores to be used in evaluating teacher performance. Twenty-one states, in particular, wouldn't be able to get Race to the Top funds until they abolish restrictions on the number of charter schools to operate and finance the schools at the same levels provided to traditional public schools.

With tax collections declining by as much as \$28 billion during the first three months of this year -- and a lack of fiscal discipline all around -- Race to the Top is spurring state legislatures to turn their backs on teachers unions. Within the past four months, the unions and their traditional public school allies in eight states -- including Tennessee, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Louisiana and Illinois -- have lost battles to keep charter school limits in place or restrict funding. Legislatures in other states, including California and New York, are leaning towards ending their caps.

Even in Massachusetts, where Democrats control all three branches of government, teachers unions can't get a break. The lure of Race to the Top funds has convinced Gov. Deval Patrick -- who opposed lifting that state's moratorium on new charters -- to reverse course and press the legislature to lift the state's 120-school cap on charters. Predictably, the state's teachers union and school districts have accused charters of "dictating state policy."

Charter school supporters can count on Obama and Duncan for support. Both have barnstormed the nation on behalf of charter school expansion, intoning that the status quo was no longer acceptable. Duncan, in particular, has told states that the Department of Education will come down on states "like a ton of bricks" if they don't fully fund charter school expansion. In Indiana, where a moratorium on charter schools was lifted just a few years ago, Duncan's statements helped state Superintendent Tony Bennett and Gov. Mitch Daniels fight off a new round of proposed limits. "Race to the Top was very important in the discussions," says Derek Redelman, a vice president with the Indiana Chamber of Commerce.

This has teachers unions echoing the complaints of federal overreach once exclusively made by conservatives. Wrote the NEA's education policy czar, Kay Brilliant, in a letter to Duncan: "The Administration has chosen the path of a series of top-down directives that may discourage rather than encourage productive innovation in classrooms and schools."

The effort to expand charter schools shouldn't be surprising to either teachers unions or to anyone else. Several times during his successful presidential bid, Obama championed the addition of new charters, even in front of NEA-supportive audiences. During his years in Chicago, Duncan (along with predecessor Paul Vallas) authorized more than 92 schools as part of Mayor Richard Daley's Renaissance 2010 initiative.

But Obama and Duncan couldn't pursue this so forcefully if not for the school reform elements within the Democratic Party, whose leadership positions, innovative policy proposals and support from organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have emerged as the

main counterweights to NEA and AFT influence.

The frustrations of Southern Democrat governors and big city mayors with the low quality of traditional public schools helped foster the charter school movement two decades ago. Bolstering this support is a younger generation of Democrats not versed in the language of union solidarity and appeals to urban renewal. Their dismay over the tolerance of incompetence within public school districts, along with the passage of No Child in 2001, has galvanized their support for choice. In fact, they have been the driving forces behind the Knowledge is Power Program and Green Dot Schools, the nation's most-prominent charter school operations.

Obama and Duncan can also count on the support of urban and some suburban parents, who willingly eschew traditional public schools for any other alternative. The number of students attending charter schools has increased by a five-fold, from 252,000 in 1998 to 1.2 million students in 2006, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Further exemplifying the demand: More than 300,000 students are waiting to attend charter schools.

For many conservative and libertarians in the school choice movement, Obama's effort to expand charter schools is no substitute for vouchers. The presence of the federal government in dictating state decision-making further assaults their senses. Cato's Neil McCluskey complains that Race to the Top is "this is just another escalation of politicized, destructive, federal education interference." Mike Petrilli, a former Education Department official and now vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, calls the entire package "Washington Knows Best at its worst."

Yet Race to the Top is no different than previous efforts by presidents to use federal funds to change state behavior, including raising the drinking age from 18 to 21, and No Child itself. More importantly, if federal money is to be spent on state priorities, then Washington must set the rules for how the money is to be spent. As Robert F. Kennedy prophesized in 1965 during the debate over the Elementary and Secondary Education Act -- and as borne over the five decades after its passage -- states will waste money if the federal government doesn't hold them accountable.

In light of the abysmal graduation rates in the nation's high schools, expanding choice by any means necessary may not be such a bad thing.

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