

## Underachieving on Education Reform

Posted By [Tait Trussell](#) On September 1, 2010 @ 12:01 am In [FrontPage](#) | [No Comments](#)

[Only 34 percent](#) <sup>[1]</sup> of Americans give President Obama an A, or even a B, for his support of public schools, says an Aug. 25 Christian Science Monitor story reporting on a public opinion survey on education. That 34 percent has dropped from 45 percent a year ago, despite administration spending of more than \$100 billion on k-12 education. Proof, as history shows, that money for education isn't what makes kids smart. The opinion survey was conducted by Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) and Gallup. Support was "slim" for the "drastic school turnaround strategies" favored by Education Secretary Arne Duncan. They involve closing 5,000 schools and firing teaching staffs that don't perform. Duncan has called on the [NAACP](#) <sup>[2]</sup> for leadership in the program.

Obama has proposed some logical changes in the nation's education system, from lifting limits on charter schools, to improving early childhood learning to merit pay for teachers, *The New York Times* reported. But having secured tens of billions of dollars in additional financing for education in his stimulus package and made clear "his aim to seek more in his budget," he outlined how he would use federal money and programs to [influence education](#) <sup>[3]</sup> at the state and local levels. "Influence" can well mean money with restrictive strings attached.

What Obama nonchalantly brushes aside is the fact that the U.S. Constitution leaves the responsibility for public K-12 education with the states, as expressed in the Tenth Amendment. But, because of the compelling concern about the quality and strength of our public schools, Congress has provided trainloads of dollars to supplement—and often interfere with—the state and local school districts. About 80 cents of every dollar for education in the recent decade has come from state and local sources. The primary source of federal money began in 1965 with the [Elementary and Secondary Education](#) <sup>[4]</sup> Act (ESEA). It was part of President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty." In 2002, it was reauthorized under George W. Bush as "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB).

Secretary Duncan said in an Aug. 9 interview on Real Clear Politics, "Our high school dropout rate around the country is 25 percent. We're [losing 1.2 million](#) <sup>[5]</sup> students from our schools...each year...Our dropout rate in the African-American Latino communities, in many areas, is 40 percent, 50 percent...We need dramatic change."

Duncan, in a speech to the NAACP in July, credited the [civil rights community](#) <sup>[2]</sup> for proposing the idea to strengthen the community involvement in school reform at a series of meetings at the White House in plans for reauthorization of ESEA to require a \$4 billion School Improvement Program, the turnaround program for low performing schools.

In February, Obama asked Congress for a [\\$3.6 billion increase](#) <sup>[6]</sup> in education money. He sought sweeping changes, as well, in the No Child Left Behind Act, which has split the education community for nearly a decade. NCLB required schools to have all students to perform at or above standards by 2014. Schools that don't meet the goals four years in a row must take corrective actions. This can include new curriculum and even state takeovers or school shutdowns. Obama's "Race to the Top" program last year had states competing for \$4 billion. His more [recent proposals](#) <sup>[7]</sup> would do away with the 2014 deadline and set up a new accountability system with more money for failing schools. It's always about more money.

Obama in March laid out a blueprint to ["upend how"](#) <sup>[8]</sup> the government measures and encourages success in the country's public schools." It intended to rewrite President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind law. "The proposal reflects the Administration's belief...that the Bush-era law is too prescriptive and too punitive, and that it allows states...to focus on standardized tests and its emphasis on reading and math over other skills," *The Wall Street*

*Journal* reported. Obama's aim, it said, was "to assure that high school graduates are 'college-ready and career-ready,'" But that's a long way from the fact that American students are far behind those in almost every other country. Amy Wilkins, vice president of the [Education Trust](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, a non-partisan organization promoting opportunity and achievement especially for low-income kids, said the Administration's plan could reward only the top 10 percent of schools while ignoring 85 percent.

The National Council on Education Statistics says the country today has 98,916 public schools with an annual revenue of [\\$1.1 trillion](#). <sup>[10]</sup> Yet, money is not the magic elixir. Compared to Europe and Asia, 15-year-olds are below average in math skills and real-life tasks. The U.S. ranks 18<sup>th</sup> out of 24 industrial countries...American students grow [more illiterate](#) <sup>[11]</sup> each year. We're spending more money, building more schools, raising teachers' pay. We should understand that higher pay, smaller classrooms and more money for schools are the [specific agenda](#) <sup>[11]</sup> of the National Education Association (NEA), "a labor union whose main job is to get more money into the education system and more pay for its members," in the words of The American Policy Center, a conservative Washington think tank.

The administration's "Race to the Top" (RTTT) program was termed "a highly political program, becoming a way to trade money for power with the unions gaming the allocation system exactly as Obama and Duncan intended them to," wrote Ben Domenech, co-founder of the RedState blog on Aug. 27. The RTTT system, which just awarded \$3.4 billion to Ohio and Maryland, that, Domenech said, "have some of the [worst education reform](#) <sup>[12]</sup> records, but have two Democrat governors running for reelection." Hawaii was also a winner, getting \$76 million. One may wonder why Hawaii was favored. The states that take the money also must take Washington's mandates. In 2008, federal funding for K-12 education accounted for about 10 percent of total education funding. Now it is close to 19 percent. It raises the question: Is Secretary Duncan just holding a bag of money in one hand and a ream of red tape in the other? Texas mat think so.

Texas tuned down the opportunity to bid for the RTTT money. Gov. Rick Perry said, "Texas is on the right path toward improved education, and we would be foolish and irresponsible to place our children's future in the hands of unelected bureaucrats and special interest groups...in Washington, virtually eliminating parents' participation in their children's education." The state recently adopted one of the nation's first college-and-career-ready curriculum standards in core subjects.

Soon after taking office, President Obama approved federal spending increases of 163 percent in k-12 education, as detailed in a Heritage Foundation analysis in March of 2009. He called for an added \$4.6 billion boost over the previous fiscal year. Moreover, his budget called for continuous increases in years ahead of \$64.6 billion in "discretionary spending" for 2014. The budget proposed new money to get localities to enact early childhood programs at the same time major increases also were asked for the federal Head Start program in the stimulus package and omnibus legislation.

But, as the Heritage report clearly states: "[Spending has not solved problems](#) <sup>[13]</sup>. And the problems have been persistent. "Since the 1980s, the federal government has sought to help disadvantaged children enter school read to learn by supporting the Head Start program." In 2008, we spent \$6.1 billion on Head Start for 900,000 children. Yet more thn 40 years after Head Start was begun, it "has not measurably improved educational outcomes," according to a Reason Foundation study. Federal spending on elementary and secondary education between 1985 and 2007 inceased by nearly 140 percent. But reading scores have remained flat.

In 1983, a national commission on excellence in education shocked the American public. "A Nation at Risk" declared in blunt terms: "Our nation is at risk...the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a [rising tide of mediocrity](#) <sup>[14]</sup> that threatens our very future....If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we well might have viewed it as an act of war....We



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