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## Oakland education gadfly backs Obama reform

Lynsi Burton, Hearst Newspapers

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Although a Democrat, Ben Chavis, the former principal of the American Indian Public Charter School in Oakland, is an unlikely advocate for the education reform plan backed by President Obama.

Chavis bucks the conventions typically associated with his party's education platform, which is generally union-friendly.

"The Democrats have it wrong, guys," Chavis said Friday at a forum hosted by the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington. "We have screwed up the public school systems."

When he took over one of Oakland's worst-performing charter schools, he emphasized the importance of standardized test scores, shamelessly ousted teachers he considered substandard, and employed military-style discipline on his students.

Now, based on California's Academic Performance Index, only four middle schools in California perform better than his Oakland charter school, where 81 percent of kids are classified as low-income.

It is this style of teaching accountability that the Obama administration seeks to employ - much to the chagrin of unions - with Race to the Top, a competitive grant program for schools that the White House unveiled in July.

The White House will split \$4.35 billion between a limited number of states that meet or exceed federal standards for upgrading student performance. Grant applications are due in December.

Among the federal eligibility requirements are linking teacher performance to students' standardized test scores - and California, for one, appears to be complying. A bill reached Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's desk Tuesday that would rework a law preventing teachers from being evaluated based on test scores.

David Sanchez, president of the California Teachers Association, said local school districts already use test scores as one of many ways to evaluate teachers. But the CTA would oppose any state effort to mandate test-linked evaluation statewide.

"Our issue is we don't want the state ... to be in the business of hiring and firing teachers," Sanchez said. "That's what school districts are for."

Several states such as Tennessee, Massachusetts and Louisiana this summer have either lifted their caps on charter schools or opened up more slots for students to improve their chances for RTTT funding.

Sanchez said that RTTT is "more of the same," referring to former President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which requires all public schools to give statewide standardized tests and sets a yearly progress standard used to determine the extent of federal aid schools receive.

Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute Center for Educational Freedom - which supports a privatized school system - spoke out against RTTT's nationwide standards at Friday's forum.

"The idea that every child in the U.S. is going to learn math at exactly the same pace and that they should be marched through a curriculum in lockstep ... is completely ludicrous," he said, adding that he does support tying teacher compensation to test scores.

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