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## In Education, 100 Days of Rhetoric and Not a Minute of Real Reform

Neal McCluskey

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If you look just at dollar signs or rhetoric to measure the education success of Barack Obama's first one-hundred days, then the President should get an A. Base it on meaningful reform, however, and he'd be lucky to get a passing grade.

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Obama's overwhelming education focus has been on getting roughly \$100 billion directed to education through the American Recover and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). But he and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, haven't just turned on the money hose. They've poured on the rhetoric as well.

"The time for holding us -- holding ourselves accountable is here," the President told the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in March. "What's required is not simply new investments, but new reforms. It's time to expect more from our students. It's time to start rewarding good teachers, stop making excuses for bad ones. It's time to demand results from government at every level."

That all sounds great. But how do you make all that good stuff really happen?

The first thing you don't do is bail out massive inefficiency and failure, but that's exactly what Obama's ceiling-shattering "investment" is doing. Spending billions upon billions to save jobs in a system that's seen huge staffing increases, skyrocketing per-pupil expenditures, but student-achievement stagnation is not forcing reform, it's rewarding failure.

Ah, but there are reform requirements attached to all that dough! States have to promise to address teacher-quality issues, establish student-progress data systems, set "rigorous" standards, and help "turn around" bad schools. And states that seem to do a good job will be eligible for a slice of the \$4.35 billion "Race-to-the-Top" fund controlled by Secretary Duncan.

But we've been hearing tough talk like this for decades and not a lot has gotten better. Is there much reason to believe that Obama will finally make the jump from rhetoric to real reform?

Nope. When government runs the schools political power is all that matters, and that resides with teachers, administrators, and other public-school employees. They have by far the most money and motivation to engage in education politics, and what's best for them is to get as much funding, and as little accountability, as possible. Considering how much cash Obama has already given them, the President seems well under their control.

Thankfully, there is a way to change the system so that power no longer resides with the very people politicians are supposed to be holding accountable. Instead of giving tax dollars to public schools, let parents control the cash. Enable parents to choose schools, and force school employees to respond to them. It's real reform that's been shown to work

Unfortunately, in his first one-hundred days Obama failed to fight for just such meaningful reform. The president did nothing to defend Washington DC's school voucher program, which provides real school choice for 1,700 education-starved kids. Indeed, what his administration did was worse than nothing: it buried a report showing vouchers' success just as Congress was debating the program's fate, and barred 200 children who had won vouchers from using them in the coming school year.

"It didn't make sense to me to put more students in the program," explained Secretary Duncan.

But here's what really doesn't make sense: spending unprecedented billions to save a hopeless system while letting real reform die. Unfortunately, such has been Obama's first 100 days.

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