



Written by [Kurt Williamsen](#) on March 13, 2009

Obama Plans to Renew Public Education

On March 10, President Barack Obama spoke in generalities about his plan to improve the nation's public schools. His plan can be summarized fairly easily: merit pay for teachers who excel, more early childhood educational opportunities (expand the Head Start program), entice schools to set higher standards by giving awards from a \$5 billion fund to states that are successful at improving schools, reduce dropout rates, scold adults so that they go back to school for higher educations, expand charter schools, get rid of bad teachers, and require kids to spend more hours in school.



In covering this topic, it seems most writers can't get past the fact that they are aghast at the thought that many public-school teachers — who largely vote for Democrats — may spurn Obama in the future because public teachers as a group are against merit pay and charter schools, which Obama is now touting. The coverage seems indicative that most reporters weren't formerly elementary or high-school teachers. If the reporters were former teachers — I believe, as someone who taught in public school for seven years and private school for two — they may have been more appalled by the fact that unless Obama is able to use mass hypnosis on the country, his plans either will not happen or they will not help.

For instance, merit pay sounds great, a free-market-type incentive based on professional accomplishments. But it's likely not so awesome. How does one, after all, decide who gets a bonus? If the bonus is based on the number students who get an "A," grades are going to rise. If the bonus is based on students' test scores, teachers had better hope they have enough seniority so that they can demand to teach the Advanced Placement classes (the smart kids) or hope that all of the teachers who taught the students previously did their jobs well enough so that the students are ready to learn grade-appropriate material. It might also be nice if the students actually came to school (when I worked in an inner-city school in Milwaukee, often less than 50 percent of the students showed up for class). It would be even better if the kids' parents made them study — or in the case of the inner city, it would be nice if the kids even lived with their parents.

It might come as a surprise to some that the amount of time and effort students invest in studying means a lot. Throughout the nation, Asian Americans tend to do very well on national math tests, demonstrating the fact that the opportunity exists in most schools to get a good mathematics education, but that most students are not putting in enough study time to master the material. Asians, by the way, tend not to do as well on verbal tests because for many English is their second language.

What do you think the chances are that teachers' bonuses will be based solely on the test scores of those kids who did all of their homework, which would be a more fair way of assessing the impact of teachers? Slim or none?

Bonuses, of course, could be awarded by the heads of departments or by principals — no chance of



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favoritism there! In the private school where I worked, teachers individually negotiated their salaries with the administration, and everyone got a different salary, just like in the “real world.” In the English Department, the highest paid teacher was not the department head; the highest paid teacher had a Ph.D. behind his name — because it just sounds cool to tell parents that one of their child’s teachers has a Ph.D. One would be hard pressed, however, to find a sizeable group of students at the school who said he was the best English teacher. Knowing lots of stuff and effectively teaching stuff are two different things.

I predict that if this plan goes through, it will have negative repercussions. In fact, it will likely lead to a loss of a lot of very good teachers because exemplary teachers who get passed over for bonuses will often look for greener pastures. When I received a “Teachers Are Tops” best teacher award, given out by a local television station, at the award dinner, each winning teacher gave a little speech. The overriding theme of those speeches (especially those of high-school teachers) was the fact that it was wonderful to finally get some recognition for all the years of dedication they had put in. It seemed that no one noticed the efforts the teachers put forth, not principals, not students, not parents. Imagine the angst such top teachers would feel if they were passed over for bonuses. In the private school where I worked, two excellent, experienced, dedicated math teachers, who not only inculcated students with math knowledge but made math fun, quit the school after finding out that a new, inexperienced math teacher made more money than they did.

Bonuses given by principals or based on students’ test scores or grades are probably not the best idea. I know: let’s draw straws to decide which teachers get bonuses!

Then there’s the dropout rate. Obama said in his speech, in reference to school-age kids: “Don’t even think about dropping out of school.” Why not? The ramifications of dropping out or flunking out are hardly the biggest worries many students have. I did my student teaching in the inner city of Milwaukee. There, a large percentage of high-school students had children of their own. Many were members of gangs and lived violent lives. We even averaged seven violent fights a week *in the school* where I taught. When a kid doesn’t believe he’ll live to see age 30, what incentive does he have to go to school? Girls might as well get pregnant and live off welfare. Boys might as well sell drugs, steal, and live the high life until they’re killed or put in prison. Truancy doesn’t even rate as an afterthought for most of the kids.

Then there’s Obama’s call to fire underperforming teachers. Great plan! I agree wholeheartedly! But what criteria would be used? And as in most every one of Obama’s school proposals, how could Washington realistically take on the task? Why should Washington get involved? Shouldn’t all of the problems be solved locally? Doesn’t this actually have to be done locally?

In my own case, while teaching in private school, my contract was not renewed after my second year, though the students put together a petition drive to stop my firing (I was told that most students in the school signed it), and though the only complaint the school president and principal made to me about my performance was that I made the seniors I was teaching do *too much critical thinking*.

My experience is hardly unique. In a span of two years, about a third of the teachers in that private school were let go — some very good teachers, some poor ones. Two nationally recognized public-school critics, R.C. Murray and Rabbi Nachum Schifren, both former public-school teachers, have similar stories to tell. Also just how is Obama going to go about ridding schools of tenure for teachers? At the public school where I taught, teachers received tenure after two years. (For a teacher with tenure to be fired would almost demand that the teacher not show up for work or that he or she molest a student.)



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And because it takes a couple of years of teaching experience before teachers really hit their stride, it's difficult to weed out the bad teachers before they get tenure. It's also next to impossible to get rid of once-excellent teachers who have now gone to seed.

The remainder of Obama's proposals to improve U.S. schools is similarly loaded with problematic issues. Solutions to improving our schools are to be found, but the Obama administration seems to be ignoring them, instead kowtowing to various educational constituencies and issuing platitudes. In looking to fix U.S. schools, trite expressions won't cut it. What is called for is jumping headfirst into the pond of mucky mire that is the problem and really cleaning up the mess wholesale, rather than having Congress throw a layer of new money on top of the filth so that congressmen can't personally smell the stink. To learn how to take the first steps in this process, see the article "[Not Accepting Student Failure](#)" from the October 29, 2007 issue of *The New American*.



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