

Obama's speech to the Urban League: Selling a toxic remedy

August 1, 2010

President Obama's speech to the Urban League about education July 29 didn't cover any new ground, but there were some shifts worth noting. He tweaked his administration's rhetorical stance towards teachers and teacher unions, adopting a less combative stance than his and Arne Duncan's support for firing teachers in a "failing" Rhode Island school. No doubt in response to teachers' outrage and resulting snubs from the two national teacher unions at their national conventions, Obama now says "the vast majority of teachers are working tirelessly, are passionate about their students, are often digging into their own pockets for basic supplies, are going above and beyond the call of duty." Score one point for reality.

Reality loses when Obama discusses the reasons poor kids (of color) have lower levels of academic achievement. The kids are "victims" to be sure, but of their communities, as he says? Of parents failure to support "educational excellence?" What about racism? Addressing criticisms that he is "always talking about parental responsibility in front of black folks?" Obama responded, "I talk about parent responsibility wherever I talk about education." This flip explanation ignores the rhetorical defense of reforms his (and the Bush administration) have made to schools - leaving no child behind. The "child" in case is understood to be black or Hispanic.

Neoliberal reforms, including Obama and Duncan's "Race to the Top," have been touted as the means to equalize educational outcomes. But we know what's occurred when these reforms have been imposed by the World Bank. They increase social inequality. They decrease school attendance and graduation rates. They decrease rates of literacy in countries with previously high literacy rates. All of this has been documented by researchers, especially in Latin America, where the reforms were put in place by military dictatorships (supported by the US). When you compare the analysis of Adriana Puigros about reforms in Latin America to "Race to the top" you see an identical architecture.

*Gut the power of traditional sources of school oversight, like school boards, by creating lots of "alternative schools" that function free of social control.

*Judge schools, teachers, and students exclusively by standardized tests (created by private companies).

*Create pressure to privatize by refusing to fund all schools adequately. Dole out a relatively small amount of additional funding to parties that conform to the master plan.

* Attack the teachers unions - which are the greatest impediment to the project.

The other assumption in Obama's speech is that education is the key to the nation's economic resurgence. As Jean Anyon and Kiersten Greene demonstrate, new jobs being created require less education, not more. If we want to put people back to work, we have to create well-paying jobs and beef up social supports, which is what Obama and the Democrats should be doing. We know from looking at the rest of the world and from documentation by advocates-turned-critic, most recently, Diane Ravitch, that the policies he advances are destroying public education in all but name.

Obama boasts that four billion dollars is being awarded to the winners of his race. That sounds like a lot of money. But NYC alone had an operating budget of 21.9 billion dollars last year, and a piddling \$800 million extra came from the federal government legislation to save jobs. Or compare the four billion dollars for education to the recent appropriation for war-related costs, \$59 billion (a

comparison the still neo-conservative Diane Ravitch won't make - but we should).

I've encountered many liberals who are reluctant to criticize Obama in public, taking what they assume to be his desire to do good to excuse the harm done by his educational policies. Obama demands "accountability" from schools and teachers. We should use the same standard in judging his administration. Whether the increase in social inequality his policies are bringing is intended or not is ultimately irrelevant. I hope the Urban League wasn't buying Obama's speech. He's a great showman selling a toxic remedy.