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Obama's Legacy for Education Policy

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Abstract

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Obama's Legacy for Education Policy

By Dave Powell on January 11, 2017 10:51 PM |

Last night Barack Obama delivered his farewell address to a raucous crowd in Chicago. This morning, Donald Trump delivered his first press conference as president-elect in front of a surprisingly raucous crowd at Trump Tower in New York. The difference between the two, in tone as well as substance, could not have been more stark.

But let's start with this: whatever you think of Obama and his politics, it's simply impossible to argue that he has been anything but an honorable and dedicated public servant. Sniping about Obama's supposed lack of qualifications began long before he even took the oath of office and it really never let up. When it became clear that questioning his qualifications wouldn't be enough, Obama's opponents questioned his legitimacy. Not just his legitimacy as president, mind you; his legitimacy as a citizen. A lot of big mouths spouted the nonsense that Obama was not born in the U.S., and was therefore ineligible to be president. The biggest mouth of all belonged to the guy we just elected to replace him.

Through it all Obama steered the ship of state steadily and in a way that was remarkably free of scandal. In this jaded and cynical age, as we still reeled from the really big lies told to us by our last two presidents, Obama entered the White House and brought unflappable honesty, dignity, and integrity to the job. I, for one, am grateful to have had an honest president serve us these past eight years, and it continues to amaze me that even now he seems unable to get the credit he deserves for that from his political opponents. His was a scandal-free government: no illicit affairs, no lies about war, no blatant acts of dishonesty. Even the people he appointed managed to stay out of trouble. And all of this seems to have escaped half the country, which continues to pillory Obama either as a bumbling idiot or a corrupt and conniving stooge, depending on who's doing the talking.

This is not to say that he got everything right—not by a longshot. Obama brought a technocratic, neoliberal sensibility to the White House that spilled over into his education policymaking and rubbed an awful lot of people the wrong way, myself included sometimes. (Valerie Strauss has a [nice rundown of Obama's education legacy here](#), and it's hard for me to disagree with much of it.) One of the most important decisions he made, early in his tenure, was to tap his friend, Arne Duncan, to serve as secretary of education, passing over the person who apparently became his second choice, Linda Darling-Hammond. It's interesting to imagine what Obama's education

policy would have looked like with Darling-Hammond, who was actually once a teacher and is currently a professor of education at Stanford, in charge, but instead Obama chose Duncan and the die was cast. "Race to the Top," a rendezvous with value-added teacher evaluation systems, at least tacit support for charter schools, ratings systems for colleges and universities, and, of course, support for Common Core and for the standardized tests attached to it, all add up to a mixed legacy at best.

In hindsight, Obama probably picked Duncan because the two of them agreed on the direction Obama wanted education policy to take (it should also be noted that Darling-Hammond may have never even really been close to the job). Say what you will about the policies they crafted, but at least admit this: even if you disagreed with them, Obama had every right to pursue the policies he chose. He was, after all, duly elected, and he did everything above board—contrary to what you may have heard about him supposedly forcing Common Core on states via a federal mandate. He even acknowledged the shortcomings of his own policies when he [admitted that we spend too much time in school giving tests](#). Above all I believe he pursued these ideas, misguided though they may have seemed to some, for the right reasons. Charter schools, teacher accountability, common standards—all of these speak to Obama's interest in equity and social justice, not for adults but for kids. Obama clearly hoped that offering the parents of underprivileged kids more choice and exposing them to better teachers and to a curriculum that held educators to high standards would improve their chances in life. Fault the means, but don't question the intended ends.

Beyond that, Obama's approach to reforming education makes sense in light of his other political values. Far from being a wild-eyed liberal, Obama was nothing if not a pragmatist. And, of course, a neoliberal: someone profoundly committed to the idea of breaking down borders, both literal and figurative, and interested in shaking up our institutions to make them meet our needs better. (He could have done more to hold the financial industry accountable for its actions leading up to the 2008-09 crisis, but that's a story for another time.) I don't know that anyone, when Obama was re-elected in 2012, could have foreseen the rebellion against neoliberalism that was heralded by the Brexit vote last summer, but it's here now and seems like it's just starting to get legs. Maybe neoliberalism will come off the mat and force the same accountability on political and financial institutions that it always insisted on for educational ones, but I wouldn't hold your breath.

In fact, as Trump takes power, and brings Betsy DeVos with him to run the Education Department, one likely outcome is that the overreach of Obama's Education Department under Duncan will be exacerbated by DeVos. What this means in practical terms, I think, is that DeVos will twist the neoliberal dream of breaking down barriers to open borders and improve the efficiency of markets in an attempt to bring prosperity to all into a hybridized reactionary fever dream where new borders are erected specifically to keep that from ever happening. In fact, I think one reason the promises of neoliberal reformers remain unfulfilled is because it's easy for politicians to exploit the anger, dislocation, and disillusionment that inevitably result in times of economic and cultural change for their own gain. In other words, maybe we *could* have brought prosperity back to West Virginia by [putting a whole lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business](#) if we had a less disingenuous Congress committed to renewable energy options and one that believed in appropriating funding for the creation of job training programs and in support of

teachers and schools. But we don't, because running against these things is apparently easier than running for them.

From where I sit DeVos' Education Department promises to be one that continues to allow Americans to self-segregate by income, by race, by cultural background—by whatever tendencies may cause us to drift further apart. As we do we'll inevitably not notice the big invisible bubbles when they form over our heads as we shuttle between work and school and WalMart with the same set of people and then follow the rest of their lives from the safety of our electronic devices on social media. See, school choice in the service of bringing people together by promoting equity is one thing; school choice in the name of letting everyone do what they want is another. I may have misjudged both Obama and DeVos on this subject, but I doubt it. I think their records speak for themselves.

I'm proud to have had Barack Obama serve as president in my lifetime, and proud to have twice voted for him. In spite of his positions on education, I would have gladly voted for him again. I'll admit that his education policy left me cold much of the time, but, then again, my judgment of education policymakers is a lot like my judgment of the schools my kids attend: some do very good things, but they'll probably never be good enough to suit me. That's just the way it is. Maybe one day we'll have a president who actually knows what it's like to be a teacher in a public school. Maybe we'll even have a secretary of education who had a long career in teaching too. In the meantime, we should at least appreciate the fact that we once had a fundamentally honest president who tried to make schools more equitable and did it with integrity. We'll be lucky if we see that again anytime soon. Thanks, Obama.