

The virtual charter schools have 'limited accountability, oversight and transparency, and the largest one in Oregon failed to graduate 70 percent of its students.' — Suzanne Cohen, teacher

America's focus on bottom line results. But in recent years, the nation has seen scandal after scandal on Wall Street as once-lauded company executives like Enron's Jeffrey Skilling and investors like Bernie Madoff have landed behind bars for cheating on results, and billions in supposed corporate value have evaporated.

With a tough re-election looming for Obama, there's evidence that his administration is retreating from bashing the millions of teachers who worked to get him elected.

Duncan has announced that he'll allow waivers of the stringent No Child Left Behind requirements installed by George W. Bush and reinforced by Obama and which would have punished almost every public school in America as "failing" by 2014.

But it appears Duncan wants to exact even more high stakes testing in exchange for the waivers. "As we leave much of NCLB behind, we will never abandon accountability," Duncan told the OBA executives.

Obama has called for increasing education spending as part of his jobs bill. Duncan told the OBA that Oregon would receive \$350 million to prevent layoffs and support the hiring or rehiring of 4,600 educators," under the proposal.

But Duncan has used previous government stimulus money as a lever to push increased high stakes testing. He bashed Oregon for his department's ranking the state near the bottom for "Race to the Top" grants. The chief criteria for the grants were a state's commitment to increase high stakes testing in response to Duncan's demands. Tennessee, which scores below average on the NAEP, won a Duncan grant, while Oregon, above average on NAEP, got bashed.

Duncan defended charter schools in Portland, offering that he had seen an unnamed private operation perform well. But he did say "where charters don't have good accountability that's not something I would support." He did not say what, if anything, he would do to increase the accountability of the privately run schools using public money.

Duncan did strike a more conciliatory tone with teachers in Portland. "I appreciate the hard work," he told them. But he then praised the Oregon Chalkboard Project, drawing hisses and boos from teachers. The Chalkboard group of corporate foundations has drawn fire from teachers for pushing the use of high-stakes testing to fire teachers.

The \$36 billion Gates Foundation funds almost every major education nonprofit in the nation including Chalkboard and also the other big education nonprofit in the state, Stand for Children. Stand for Children has drawn fire recently for promoting *Waiting for Superman*, a documentary viewed by many teachers as anti-public schools, and for using millions of dollars of Wall Street money to lobby against teachers in other states. Stand has denied that it's pursuing a corporate school agenda.

"I hear you," Duncan said to the Chalkboard boos. But a few hours later,

he praised the "outstanding" Chalkboard work to the OBA executives.

There are indications that reforming the testing and privatization war on schools is possible. Diane Ravitch advocated for high-stakes testing and privatization as a member of the first Bush administration. But last year she slammed the tycoon and politician reforms as hurting public education in a book that's helped inspire the current groundswell of opposition.

So without high-stakes testing, how can people identify the schools and teachers that most need help?

The answer isn't rocket science. Ample research shows schools and classes with the most poor kids have the biggest challenge teaching and need the most help. Oregon has maintained detailed rankings of all state schools by socioeconomic status, which includes poverty and parents' education level, for more than a decade.

Identifying and helping the relatively small numbers of teachers that aren't performing well is a matter of good school administration and will require change. Mike Haliski, a consultant who works helping teachers in Oregon City, told Duncan that teachers have told him, "I can't really recall the last time my administrator came to my classroom and gave me quality feedback."

Using administrators to closely supervise and coach struggling teachers in the classroom will require money to attract enough high quality supervisors to do the job, and/or backfill teacher time for peer evaluations and coaching.

Eugene so far appears to be resisting the national tide for using high-stakes testing and privatization to slam teachers and public schools.

"We have to stop bashing teachers and teaching," said 4J's new Superintendent Sheldon Berman to applause at the City Club last month.

"The solutions being proposed at the federal level and by some of the funders like Gates are going off in the wrong direction," Berman said of the high-stakes testing to punish and privatize management of schools.

"The vast majority of teachers are doing extraordinary work," Berman said. "The direction has to be how do we really build capacity, how do we elevate our teachers so that they are the best they can be."

Duncan said the Obama administration is now interested in bringing teachers to the table with the corporate executives it has been cozying up to for education reform. "What we're trying to do is be a much better partner" with teachers, he said. "They (teachers) need to listen to us, we need to listen to them," Duncan said.

But Deborah Barnes, a North Clackamas teacher, questioned why Obama and Duncan had turned first to Wall Street for education policy rather than asking the front line experts trying to teach the nation's kids every day. "Our voice, and more importantly those of our students, needs to be heard and valued," she said.

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