

Obama targets 5,000 schools nationwide for closing, reopening

Written by Dorothy Rowley, Special to the NNPA from the Afro-American Newspapers
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) - President Barack Obama has targeted 5,000 schools across the country to be closed then reopened with new faculty and administrators over a five-year span.

The move is in keeping with his promise to improve public education, the White House says. While the president lacks the power to close chronically underperforming schools himself, his strategy would have local school officials in various states and jurisdictions work closely with his administration to see what works for public education.

So far a list of the targeted schools has not been made available and will be determined in consultation of both state and local districts based on criteria established for them under guidance of the federal Education Department. But they would be in the bottom 5 percent of those in ailing systems -- and the goal would be to transform 1,000 of them each year into vigorous learning facilities.

District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) is currently undergoing rigorous reformation under no nonsense Chancellor Michelle Rhee; and according to a report by Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy, the number of schools in Maryland under restructuring has steadily increased over the past year, with the state currently listing 85 schools that have failed to meet standards outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002.

Under Obama's watch, NCLB which is allotted about \$500m million each year, is slated to be rewritten.

While the District continues to lose many of its students to charter facilities, DCPS officials have implemented projects such as the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program and DC Stars to drive up student achievement.

The Center for Educator Compensation Reform has reported that DCPS schools made significant gains on the state assessment over the last academic year, but that less than half of students reached proficiency levels in both reading and math on the 2008 tests. However, DCPS's graduation rate increased slightly from 66.2 percent in 2006 to 67.9 percent in 2007.

Many of such improvements came under the leadership of former District of Columbia Board of Education President Robert Bobb, who left the District earlier this year to take up an emergency challenge in Detroit to turn its public schools around.

According to reports in Detroit, Bobb has asked U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan to help get the school system "placed under a special presidential emergency declaration" to get federal funding for infrastructure and curriculum.

Referring to Obama's plan, Duncan said children just have one shot at a good education and Obama's plan includes better pay for teachers as well as untested ideas for turning the systems around.

Duncan, a former Chicago schools chief, commented in an Associated Press interview, that

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Obama's strategy could also mean replacing a principal or turning a school over to a charter school operator.

"We really want to put a laser-like focus on those schools that have historically under-performed," Duncan said.

He also during a recent speech at the Brookings Institute in Washington that, "If we turn around just the bottom one percent, the bottom thousand schools per year for the next five years, we could really move the needle, lift the bottom and change the lives of tens of millions of underserved children."

Obama's plan hinges on as much as \$5 billion earmarked in his budget for the federal school turnaround program. As a result, each of the schools involved could be in line for \$1 million each in program and staff upgrades.

In addition, the president's stimulus legislation has reportedly boosted funding to \$3.5 billion and his budget would add another \$1.5 billion by shifting dollars away from traditional programs. But not everyone is in line with Obama's plan, saying that overall it would equate to less schools funding. For example, funding for Title One schools which are normally appropriated the largest federal dollars, would decrease to just under \$13 billion from the \$13.4 billion allocated this year, according to a Black America Web report.

Mary Kusler, a lobbyist for the American Association of School Administrators said district officials have already planned their budgets and may have to use stimulus dollars to make up the difference.

Said Kusler, "The increases that were provided to districts through the stimulus were not instead of future funds — they were supposed to be in addition to future funds."