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Obama Backs Rewarding Districts That Police Failing Schools

By **JEFF ZELENY**

WASHINGTON — **President Obama** said Monday that he favored federal rewards for local school districts that fire underperforming teachers and close failing schools, saying educators needed to be held accountable when they failed to fix chronically troubled classrooms and curb the student dropout rate.

The president outlined his proposal to offer \$900 million in federal grants, which would be made available to states and school districts willing to take aggressive steps to turn around struggling institutions or close them.

The president's proposal, which was included in his 2011 budget request to Congress, is his latest criticism of America's failing public schools. In a speech at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Obama said federal aid would be available for the districts that are home to the 2,000 schools that produce more than half of the nation's dropouts.

He spoke alongside former Secretary of State **Colin Powell** and his wife, Alma, who lead **America's Promise Alliance**, an advocacy group dedicated to combating the school dropout rate.

"We know that the success of every American will be tied more closely than ever before to the level of education that they achieve," Mr. Obama said. "The jobs will go to the people with the knowledge and the skills to do them. It's that simple."

He singled out Central Falls High School in Rhode Island, where last week the school board voted to dismiss the entire faculty as part of a turnaround plan for the school, which has a 48 percent graduation rate.

At Central Falls High, he said, just 7 percent of 11th graders passed state math tests. Mr. Obama said he supported the school board's decision to dismiss the faculty and staff members. "Our kids get only one chance at an education and we need to get it right," he said.

The president's comments incensed the leadership of the [American Federation of Teachers](#), which criticized Mr. Obama for "condoning the mass firing" of teachers at the Rhode Island school.

"We know it is tempting for people in Washington to score political points by scapegoating teachers, but it does nothing to give our students and teachers the tools they need to succeed," the president of the union, [Randi Weingarten](#), said in a statement.

In their efforts to overhaul failing public schools, Mr. Obama and his education secretary, [Arne Duncan](#), have frequently drawn the ire of teachers' unions.

In his speech on Monday, Mr. Obama said states would be asked to identify schools that perform at persistently low levels, with graduation rates of 60 percent or less.

To qualify for the federal money, known as School Turnaround Grants, he said, the school districts must agree to take at least one of the steps: firing the principal and at least half the staff of a troubled school; reopening it as a [charter school](#); or closing the school altogether and transferring students to better schools in the district.

"If a school continues to fail its students year after year after year," Mr. Obama said, "if it doesn't show signs of improvement, then there's got to be a sense of accountability."

The \$900 million grant program, which would be subject to Congressional approval, follows \$3.5 billion included in last year's economic [stimulus plan](#) that also was aimed at improving school performance and lowering the dropout rate. The program would support interventions at 5,000 of the nation's lowest-performing schools over the next five years.

Mr. Obama is seeking to use federal money as an incentive for local schools to improve their standards. The initiatives his administration is pursuing are similar to those of the Bush administration. At the event on Monday, Mr. Obama recognized [Margaret Spellings](#), a secretary of education under President [George W. Bush](#), who was seated in the front row.

Mr. Obama said he was particularly troubled by the dropout rate. He said 1.2 million students left school each year before graduating from high school, at a cost to the nation of \$319 billion annually in potential earning losses.

"Now it's true that not long ago you could drop out of high school and reasonably expect to find a blue-collar job that would pay the bills and help support your family," Mr. Obama said.

"That's just not the case anymore."

The Powells, who founded America's Promise Alliance in 1997, announced on Monday a 10-year

campaign called “Grad Nation” directed at the lowest performing high schools in the country and focusing on improving graduation rates and preparations for college.

“We’ve got to catch our kids long before they drop out,” Mr. Powell said.

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