

Educating America: The Challenge of the Obama Administration



By Rich McKeon

Newly-elected President Barack Obama will need to address numerous critical issues while in the White House, ranging from the economic crisis to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. With this wide variety of areas to govern, he will be relying on his administration to help drive much of his agenda. This will be an important challenge for his Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, the former CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, who was tapped by Mr. Obama to serve this role. Mr. Obama called him the “most hands-on of hands-on practitioners in education reform today.”

Secretary Duncan comes to the position with real-world training by having led the nation’s third largest public school system since 2001. In that role, he developed the reputation of a pragmatic reformer who made the right decisions to benefit children. While he has never been a public school teacher himself, he spent many years tutoring inner-city children in Chicago at his mother’s nonprofit, The Sue Duncan Children’s Center. This philanthropic experience seems to have had a profound effect on him and has colored his thinking about education reform. In his confirmation hearings, Mr. Duncan acknowledged three deeply-held beliefs: (1) every child from every background can be successful; (2) if educators fail to properly educate children, they perpetuate poverty and social failure; and, (3) children have one chance at a quality education, and thus there is an extraordinary urgency for schools to ensure

high-quality education for every child. It is likely that these themes will emerge throughout his work as Secretary of Education.

So, what can we expect for education in an Obama administration?

Big Bets on Early Education

Expect big investments in birth-to-five early childhood education. This might even be the first big education initiative for the administration to take on. During the campaign, President Barack Obama made the commitment to quadruple the capacity of Early Head Start by increasing its funding and improving quality. The campaign quoted a \$1 investment in this area as having a payoff of \$7–10 in decreased need for special education services, less crime, less use of the public welfare system, and higher rates of graduation and employment. His plans include the creation of Early Learning Challenge Grants to encourage states to fund “zero to five” efforts. There is also substantial funding for child care and Head Start in the current stimulus proposals under review by Congress as part of the commitment to support working families.

“We’re very hopeful that President Obama and Secretary Duncan and Secretary Daschle will promote challenge grants to the states for early learning which has the potential to build synergy with federal and state resources to not only increase funding, but importantly, to coordinate the numerous funding streams to better expand options for children and families,” states Nancy Kolben, Executive Director of Child Care, Inc.

NCLB Recycled, Not Left Behind

The recycling of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) will include a new name since the present program garners very negative reactions from the general public. The assessments may be modified, but NCLB will remain largely intact and will likely be re-authorized within Mr. Obama’s first or second year. According to Mr. Duncan, “I agree with the President that we should neither bury NCLB nor praise it without reservation. I support the core goals of high

standards for all.” During the primaries, Mr. Obama did not take what would have been the popular stance in some Democratic circles to abolish NCLB. He believes that the goals and accountability provisions of NCLB are the right ones and that better assessments will make them more constructive. Extinguishing the light that NCLB has cast upon schools that were not educating minority and special needs children to their fullest abilities will not happen in an Obama administration.

Improving Teacher Talent

With regard to teacher quality, Secretary Duncan remarked that “talent matters tremendously” and pledged to “support it, recognize it, reward it and grow it.” Mr. Duncan mentioned that Chicago’s public schools have increased the selectivity of its hiring process and has grown its applicant pool to 10 applications per position compared to the previous two. He is also a strong believer in growing the numbers of teaching candidates by expanding alternative certification, a process by which teachers can be certified outside of the traditional path available through a school of education. Teach For America is one alternate programmatic route supported by the Secretary. Pay-for-performance contracts are another form of incentive Mr. Duncan believes will promote higher teacher quality.

Innovation Unleashed

Arne Duncan has taken a fresh look at how to improve schools in Chicago and has embraced initiatives such as online classes for middle and high school students, school-based autonomy, and creative re-enrollment programs for high school dropouts. It is likely that this type of innovation will carry over to his new job. Even before Mr. Duncan’s nomination was announced, there was talk of an “innovation fund” to allow creative ideas to be tested as research and development for the Department of Education. If successful, these ideas could be replicated throughout the country.

Support of Charter Schools

During the campaign, President Barack Obama committed to doubling support for charter schools, and Mr. Duncan reiterated this objective by saying, “Our children don’t know or care whether they are attending a charter school or a traditional school, they know whether their teacher cares about them.”

His stance on this matter did not solely arise following his recent appointment, as Mr. Duncan had previously been supportive of charter schools in Chicago.

At a campaign stop in May of 2008, President Obama congratulated students and teachers from Mapleton Expeditionary School of the Arts in Colorado for dramatically increasing the students college acceptance rate. Mr. Obama commented, “I’m here to congratulate you on this achievement, but also to hold up this school and these students as an example of what’s possible in education if we’re willing to break free from the tired thinking and political stalemate that’s dominated Washington for



decades, if we’re willing to try new ideas and new reforms based not on ideology but on what works to give our children the best possible chance in life.” This innovative thinking will likely be embraced by both President Obama and Secretary Duncan as a way to improve education in the U.S.

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