"My Only Goal is Success" Capitol Ideas Interviews Education Secretary Arne Duncan About Issues Facing Education

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The Obama administration is taking steps to engage the states in a new dialogue to address issues facing education in the U.S. today. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, a former Chicago school superintendent is leading the charge to spark reform in the nation’s schools. He’s open to anything that will address underperforming schools and close the achievement gap, and that includes altering the way education funding is awarded as well as supporting changes states are already making. “My only goal is success,” he said. Capitol Ideas visited with Duncan about the issues.

Federal Role in Education

“Our role in Washington is to support reform by encouraging bold approaches to addressing underperforming schools, closing the achievement gap, strengthening the field of education, reducing the dropout rate, and boosting college access and success. Historically, the department has been an agency that monitored compliance with federal regulations. I want the department to become an engine of innovation. I want the department to provide powerful incentives to states, districts and nonprofits to innovate—but at the same time leave most of the entrepreneurship for achieving our common goals in local hands. People want national leadership but not at the expense of local control.”

No Child Left Behind

“No Child Left Behind (NCLB) helped to expose the achievement gap by requiring reporting of test scores by all students and all subgroups. It made sure that schools were accountable for the performance of all students, including those that were previously excluded from accountability. It required that we measure our efforts to improve education by looking at outcomes and it helped create a national conversation about student achievement.

“On the other hand, NCLB unfairly labeled many schools as failures even when they were making progress. It placed too much emphasis on standardized tests, and didn’t account for students’ academic growth in its accountability system.

“NCLB’s biggest mistake was that it didn’t encourage high learning standards. By letting each state define ‘proficiency,’ it encouraged states to lower standards. The net effect is that we told parents and kids they were succeeding when, in fact, they were not.”
Elementary and Secondary Education Act
“The (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) needs a fair system of accountability that—instead of labeling schools as failing but not providing support to improve—will focus the most intensive interventions and resources on the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools and those with persistent achievement gaps. Rather than dictating one-size-fits-all solutions, we want to give the vast majority of schools flexibility to improve. We want to reward schools that accelerate student achievement, and identify and reward outstanding teachers and leaders. We also want to support students most at risk in low-performing schools and schools with large, persistent achievement gaps. But we need to focus on turning around the bottom 5 percent of schools so they give students the worldclass education they deserve.”

Race to the Top
“States have responded to the financial incentive of Race to the Top to build their capacity for reform. In 46 states and the District of Columbia, governors, educators, parents, union leaders and community activists worked together to create bold, comprehensive plans for reform. Every state that applied will benefit from this consensus-building process. They have bold plans for reforms with statewide buy-in. Beyond Race to the Top, other federal dollars will support their plans to raise standards, improve teaching and use data more effectively to support student learning and turn around underperforming schools.

“President Obama has indicated that he wants to keep the momentum of Race to the Top going. He is proposing to make Race to the Top a permanent part of the Department’s budget—requesting $1.35 billion in fiscal 2011. In our Blueprint for Reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, we have proposed expanding Race to the Top to include both state- and district-level competitions.”

Lasting Reform
“I have often said this isn’t just about the money. Real change is driven by people willing to give their lives to a cause. States, districts, teachers and school leaders are fed up with schools that don’t work. They know that changing our schools is about working together and putting the needs of children ahead of everyone else. The entire (Race to the Top) process has moved the nation and already dramatically accelerated education reform. I’m confident that our nation’s leaders are committed to continuing reforms.”

School Improvement Grants
“Through the Title I School Improvement Grants program, states are identifying almost 5,000 schools that need to be turned around. They have been chronically underperforming and need to be fundamentally changed. With grants from this program, we are supporting local efforts to adopt proven turnaround strategies. These schools will need to make tough choices about improving their leadership and teaching to accelerate student achievement.”

Federal Funding Mechanisms
“We don’t want to get sidetracked in a false choice between competitive and formula funding—we need them both. Formula programs provide important foundational support for the education of students with unique needs, such as disadvantaged students and students with disabilities. Competitive programs provide incentives for reform that will help all students and they will reward proposals that give priority to high-need students. Our Blueprint and our 2011 budget request both call for maintaining funding formula programs. In our proposed 2011 budget, 80 percent of the funding for K-12 programs is formula funding.”

Charter Schools
“Charter schools are public schools. They serve our children with our money. They are accountable to taxpayers—just as traditional public schools are. One big difference is that they have more autonomy.
The best of them go beyond the regular school day and provide social services such as parenting classes for young moms. They stay with students every step of the way—from pre-k through college. I have said repeatedly that I am not a fan of charters—but I am a fan of good charters—just as I am a fan of good traditional schools. My only goal is success.”

Common Core State Standards
“In America, we have had 50 different standards and 50 different goalposts. In basketball the basket is always 10 feet high. In football the field is always 100 yards long. A 3-pointer is always worth three points and a touchdown is always worth six. Only in education do we have 50 different goalposts. When parents are told their children are ‘meeting a state standard,’ they assume that their child is on track to be successful. But in states with low standards, that’s not true. The state-led effort to adopt common standards that are designed to prepare students for college and careers will give parents an honest report of their children’s progress.”

Linking K-12 and Higher Education
“Collaboration and linkages between early learning, K-12, higher education, and adult education can be game changing for our children and our country. Their mutual self-interest will drive the development of rigorous standards, enhance the profession of teaching, and improve the data systems that will drive reform. Three areas are ripe for collaboration: the development of rigorous, college- and career-ready standards; rethinking teacher preparation programs and professional development; and developing comprehensive cradle-to-career data systems that incorporate strong safeguards to protect student privacy.

“To reach the president’s goal that America should once again have the highest college graduation rate in the world by the end of the decade, K-12 and higher education must become synergistic—working together to accomplish much more than working apart. If they continue to expand their collaboration, align their work and share their resources, they can produce meaningful agreements that have the authority to impact the way the education system actually works.”

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