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SLAM DUNK-AN: Senate Unanimously Confirms Arne Duncan as Next U.S. Secretary of Education

By a voice vote on January 20, the U.S. Senate confirmed **Chicago Public Schools chief Arne Duncan** as U.S. Secretary of Education. When he [nominated Duncan to be Secretary of Education in December](#), then-President-elect Barack Obama called him the “most hands-on of hands-on practitioners,” adding “For Arne, school reform isn’t just a theory in a book—it’s the cause of his life.”

Prior to his Senate confirmation, Duncan (who is also known as a basketball-playing buddy of the new president) appeared before the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee on January 13. In his testimony, Duncan underscored the importance of education to America’s future economic security, expressed his intention to examine merit pay for teachers, and emphasized the need to reduce dropout rates and ensure that more students both enroll in and graduate from college.

In his opening statement, **Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA)**, who chaired the hearing at the request of **Senate HELP Committee Chairman Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA)**, outlined several challenges that the Obama administration will face, including the need for a fresh perspective on the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), greater college access, and improved access to early education. He also focused on the importance of a new commitment to education funding, adding that the Title I program had been underfunded by \$55 billion over the last seven years while the federal government had failed to advance its commitment to fund the education of children with disabilities. “Reform without new resources is just so much wishful thinking,” Harkin said.

Senator Mike Enzi (R-WY), the ranking Republican on the HELP Committee, used his opening statement to link the importance of education to the nation’s economic future. He stressed that too many students were dropping out of high school and leaving college before earning a degree. “We’ve seen ongoing improvement in education that our children receive in our nation’s schools,” Enzi said. “But I would say that even with the progress we’ve made, it’s not been enough. I believe that education is a key factor in securing a sound economic future for our country. Everyone, regardless of their background, needs access to quality education and training throughout their lives.”

Duncan Outlines President Obama’s Education Vision

Saying that it was an “extraordinary time” for the nation and an “extraordinary time to be working on education,” Duncan testified that he approached the position of secretary of education with three deeply held beliefs. First, every child from every background can be

successful when adults do their jobs and give the children the opportunities to succeed. Second, when adults fail to properly educate children, they perpetuate poverty and social failure. Third, children have one chance at a quality education. For that last reason, he said, “we must work with an extraordinary sense of urgency. Simply put, we cannot wait because they cannot wait.”

Explaining that President Obama views education as “both a moral obligation and an economic imperative,” Duncan outlined some of the education initiatives that Obama plans to pursue. He mentioned the need to improve the access to and the quality of early childhood education, to raise standards and increase teacher quality, and to ensure greater access to higher education and strengthen institutions such as community colleges, which he said were “critically important” to giving people a second chance at retooling their skills and getting back into the workforce.

Duncan noted two themes that were very important to him and that he felt should permeate the work that needed to be done. The first was to do dramatically better and continue to innovate, which, as he explained it, means building upon what works and challenging the status quo. The second was to recognize and reward excellence.

“We have to elevate the teaching profession,” he said. “We have to build upon this next generation of leaders in our schools and our state boards. And we have to find ways to scale up what works. There are great, great pockets of excellence as we look across every state in this country. We have to find ways that scale up what works and shine a spotlight on those educators who are doing an extraordinary job and going above and beyond the call of duty...”

Duncan Focused on Attracting and Rewarding Great Teachers

In response to a question from **Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN)**, himself a U.S. Secretary of Education under President George H.W. Bush from March 1991 to January 1993, Duncan further explained how he proposed to reward outstanding teaching.

“In the education business, talent matters tremendously,” Duncan said. “We can have the best curriculum, the best technology, we can have a great facility, but if we don’t have great teachers in every classroom, the rest of it just isn’t as important. So whatever we can do to support great teaching, recognize it, reward it, grow it, that’s the best thing that we can do.”

Duncan called the Teacher Incentive Fund, which supports efforts to develop and implement performance-based teacher and principal compensation systems in high-need schools, one of the best things that former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings did. He said that program, which he implemented in Chicago in partnership with the teachers’ union and a teacher advisory council, had been a great help to him because it had allowed him to recognize and reward excellence in some of the toughest communities. He said that he not only supported the program, but that he wanted to expand it as secretary.

“The more we can reward excellence, the more we can incent excellence, the more we can get our best teachers to work in those hard-to-staff schools and communities, the better our students are going to do,” Duncan said. “I plan on spending a lot of time thinking about how we can continue to innovate, continue to incent the talent to come into teaching, and keep that great talent once it’s there.”

Duncan expressed optimism that the nation could do a better job in attracting talent to the teaching profession, saying that there was a “groundswell” of young people who were committed, passionate, and wanted to make a difference. He added that the tough economic conditions could actually help recruit great talent, implying that recent graduates accustomed to landing jobs in the private sector could see those openings evaporate as corporations cut jobs. Duncan also stressed the importance of great mentoring and induction programs, particularly during the early years of a teacher’s career. For older teachers, he proposed clear career ladders so teachers could “see a way to grow and continue to improve their skills.” He also discussed the importance of training principals to support and manage their team of teachers.

Tackling the High School Dropout Crisis

During the hearing, several senators focused on ways to reduce the number of students who drop out of high school. **Senator Richard Burr (R-NC)** said that low high school graduation rates were “fueling” prison construction, prison costs, welfare payments, and dependence on food stamps. “Today’s twenty-first century economy requires a minimum of a high school diploma—not to be able to fill out an application, but to be invited for an interview,” he said. “So we’re fooling ourselves if we believe that as a country, we can sit here with a 70 percent graduation rate from high school on time and [believe] that [the other] 30 percent of our kids are going to have the tools to compete.”

Duncan agreed that the low high school graduation rates were “very sobering statistics” that “present huge challenges.” He noted that while other countries had done a good job of raising their high school graduation rates, the rates in the United States had stagnated, which had allowed other countries to catch up with and surpass the United States “Whether you’re looking from an economic standpoint [or] from a human standpoint, we have to do something dramatically better,” he said.

“In the face of rising global competition, we know that education is the critical, some would say the only road to economic security,” Duncan said. “Quality education is also the civil rights issue of our generation. It’s the only path out of poverty and the only road to a more equal, just and fair society. In fact, I believe the fight for quality education is about so much more than education. It’s a fight for social justice.”

As evidence that the country can solve the dropout crisis, Duncan pointed to high-performing high schools in some of America’s toughest communities that are graduating 95 percent of their students and sending them to college. He said he would push hard to scale up these programs and schools, continue to innovate, and continue to focus on the problem as secretary of education.

“I would argue that while third grade test scores are important and that’s how many of us were measured, if my third grade test scores are fantastic and my dropout rates are too high, I’m not helping my students be successful and I’m not changing their lives,” he said. “And so, in as many ways that I can, both from the bully pulpit, as well as strategically, I want to shine a spotlight on this and see if we can reverse those trends significantly. . . . if we’re serious about reducing the dropout rate, we can’t wait until eleventh or twelfth grade—those kids are gone, they’re on the streets.”

Video of Arne Duncan’s confirmation hearing is available at <http://tinyurl.com/b3tl13>.



AMERICAN RECOVERY AND REINVESTMENT: Proposed Economic Stimulus Bill Contains Over \$140 Billion in Education Funding

Earlier this month, **House Appropriations Committee Chairman Dave Obey (D-WI)** released the details of an \$825 billion economic stimulus bill designed to create jobs and jumpstart the American economy. The bill, dubbed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, is a mix of \$275 billion in tax breaks and \$550 billion in spending—of which, more than \$140 billion would be devoted to education.

President Obama said the plan would “save or create over three million jobs, provide tax relief to struggling families and businesses that create jobs, and invest in priorities like health care, education, and energy that will make America strong and competitive in the twenty-first century.” He also called it a “significant down payment on our most urgent challenges.”

Nowhere was that down payment more obvious than in education. According to a summary from the House Appropriations Committee, local school districts would receive \$13 billion in funding through the Title I program and an additional \$13 billion through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The legislation would also provide \$20 billion for school construction, with \$14 billion targeted for grades K–12 and \$6 billion for higher education. It also includes \$15.6 billion for a \$500 increase in the maximum Pell grant and \$1 billion for twenty-first-century classrooms, which includes computer and science labs and teacher technology training. (A sampling of other proposed spending for education programs is in the table below.)

Program Name	Proposed Spending
Statewide Data Systems	\$250 million
Teacher Incentive Fund	\$200 million
Teacher Quality Enhancement Grants	\$100 million
Impact Aid	\$100 million

In addition to this funding, states would also receive \$79 billion in the form of fiscal relief to prevent cuts to education programs. Included in that total is \$15 billion to states as bonus grants for meeting key performance measures, \$25 billion to states for other high-priority needs which may include education, and \$39 billion to local school districts and public colleges and universities that will be distributed through existing state and federal formulas, up to \$325 million of which could go to an innovation fund.

“The down payment actually builds a lot of the proposed ‘education house,’” **Bob Wise, the president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia** told the [New York Times](#). “This economic stimulus package shows that as we shift from an industrial to an information economy, education is the new currency.”

Republicans have questioned both the size of the legislation and how quickly it could impact the economy. Instead, they favor a smaller bill that would focus on tax cuts and infrastructure projects that are more likely to create jobs quickly.

Pointing to “shovel-ready” projects like road and highway spending, **Representative Jerry Lewis (R-CA), the ranking minority member on the House Appropriations Committee**, said, “These are the types of infrastructure investments that will create sustainable jobs and

should be given even greater priority within this package.” He also cautioned Democrats not to use the legislation as a “vehicle” to provide increases in domestic programs, which he said could create “unrealistic expectations for future spending.”

Because Democrats hold a sizeable majority in the House of Representatives and control fifty-eight seats in the Senate, they would only need the support of a handful of Republican to enact the legislation. However, many see the stimulus legislation as an early test of President Obama’s ability to follow through on campaign promises to bring more cooperation to the nation’s capitol.

To that end, Obama met with Congressional leaders from both parties on January 23 to discuss the legislation. After emerging from that meeting, **Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY)** said that the president struck him as “open” to Republican suggestions. **House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH)** was not as positive. “At this point, spending nearly a trillion dollars is more than we ought to put on the backs of our kids,” Boehner said.

Obama is also expected to meet with House Republicans during the week of January 26 to hear their concerns. It has been reported that the president would be willing to accept some tax breaks for businesses, but is not ready to reduce spending.

The House is expected to consider the legislation on January 28 while Senate debate is expected to begin on February 2. **House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)** has said that the bill is on schedule to receive approval before the Presidents Day holiday. Should Congress not pass the legislation by that time, Pelosi said she would keep Congress in session to work on it.

Additional information on the legislation is available at <http://appropriations.house.gov/>.



STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESSES: Though Many Governors Consider K–12 Education a Priority, Funding Still Cut Due to Economic Crisis

As in the [previous issue](#), *Straight A’s* continues to report on governors’ state of the state addresses, focusing on their remarks around K–12 education.

Colorado: Ritter Plans to Implement More Reforms Despite Economic Downturn

In his [state of the state address](#), **Governor Bill Ritter Jr. (D)** emphasized the importance of education in reversing the economic downturn. “[T]he best economic strategy is an education strategy,” he said during his January 8 speech. He praised Colorado’s workforce as being among the best educated in the country, but noted that the state still had a lot of work to do, listing achievement gaps, college graduation rates, and lack of progress in student learning as things that needed to be fixed.

Ritter told his constituents to expect the implementation of more reform initiatives. These will include a concurrent enrollment plan to allow high school students statewide to earn college credits before graduating—a program that, Ritter said, will set “high, rigorous academic standards while keeping college affordable and accessible.” The plan also addresses two of his main education goals: cutting the dropout rate in half and doubling the number of college degrees earned by Colorado students.

However, because Colorado, like many other states, faces large budget deficits for Fiscal Year (FY) 2009 and FY 2010, Ritter has had to make some cuts in education spending, even though his budget would meet a requirement in the state's constitution to increase education spending every year. For example, Ritter would save \$34.5 million by freezing the construction of full-day kindergarten classrooms and \$4.9 million by cutting funds earmarked for the construction of charter schools. In addition, he called for a \$30 million cut for colleges and universities.

Idaho: Otter Reduces K–12 Education Funding After Avoiding Cuts Last Year

Though public education funding was exempt from budget holdbacks in the last fiscal year, that will not be the case in Fiscal Year (FY) 2010, said **Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter (R)** in his [state of the state address](#) on January 12.

Last year, the state drew upon an education reserve fund it had established in better economic times. The fund is still available, but Otter said in his speech that he did not want to take any more than 35 percent of the total reserves to get through the rest of FY 2009 and 2010. This year, K–12 education spending will be cut by about 5.3 percent. Otter stressed that the roughly \$1.4 billion allotted for K–12 education “still represents almost half our total General Fund budget,” adding, “[M]y proposed public schools budget is reduced far less than I’m recommending for other state agencies,” a few of which saw their funding slashed by over one third.

Otter also wants to move some of the state school board's responsibilities to the Idaho State Department of Education or other government agencies to allow the board to focus more on policy setting, oversight, and higher education. The governor also proposed raising fuel taxes and car registration fees, an idea reviled by both parties. His fellow Republicans are opposed to increasing taxes while Idaho's economy faces its worst downturn since the 1980s. Meanwhile, Democrats were critical of Otter's plan because it values “potholes over people,” as Elliot Werk, chairman of the Idaho **Senate Democratic Caucus**, told the [Idaho Statesman](#).

Werk added that he thought Otter should withdraw more money from the state's reserve fund. “By using very little of the rainy day funds, you're taking \$80 million out of education's hide,” Werk said. **House Democratic Leader John Rusche** agreed. “He's asking for a tax increase for transportation,” he said. “To do that at a time when K–12 and higher education—things that build our future—are going to take hits is misplaced priorities.”

Kansas: Sebelius Tries to Maintain State's Investment in Education

In her [state of the state speech](#) on January 12, **Governor Kathleen Sebelius (D)** declared her intent to keep education as a major funding priority despite the state's financial shortfalls. “In an economic downturn, decisions can have dire consequences and a lifetime impact on future generations,” she said. “No student can afford to ‘miss’ a few years of quality education.... We invested millions in our schools, our students, our teachers, and our future. And even now, looking through the lens of today's economy, that investment was worth it and worth keeping.”

However, some lawmakers are less than happy with Sebelius's plan to avoid significantly cutting public education funding, given that Kansas faces a roughly \$1.2 billion shortfall for 2009 and 2010. “The bulk of new money we've received over the past few years has all gone into K–12,” said **Kevin Yoder, Republican chairman of the Kansas House Appropriations**

Committee, in an [Associated Press](#) story on the issue. “We are starving the rest of government for the sake of keeping K-12 harmless.”

Sebelius did say that the downturn would keep schools from receiving \$183 million in increased aid that they were promised through a 2006 law, and proposed to cut \$24 million in public education funding for Fiscal Year (FY) 2010. However, the \$24 million represents just 0.6 percent of the total funds. In contrast, Kansas’ higher education system would have to cut its budget by \$25 million for this fiscal year and \$56 million more for FY 2010—and lose 9 percent of its state funds.

Under Sebelius’s budget, 52 percent of state tax revenues would go to public education, a share that has increased by 39 percent over the past four years, says the article. Sebelius has argued that such an increase was necessary to make up for comparatively low education spending levels in the 1990s.

Oregon: Kulongoski Wants to “Build a Protective Wall Around Funding for Education”

“If we’re going to turn unemployment checks into paychecks, the state must invest in its human infrastructure,” **Governor Ted Kulongoski (D)** said in his [state of the state address](#) on January 12. Kulongoski added that he considered education a major concern, calling it his “top priority for this upcoming biennium...because only by creating the best trained, best skilled, best educated workforce in America will we be able to create the employment opportunities that are this state’s future,” he said. “I’ve been saying for months that the way to turn despair into hope, and uncertainty into prosperity, is to build a protective wall around funding for education.”

Kulongoski did not, however, mention specific budgetary amounts for public schools, or most of his other main priorities, which include investing in renewable energy technology, building a larger science infrastructure, and rebuilding and improving Oregon’s transportation system.

Though Kulongoski did not explicitly describe K–12 allocations for FY 2010, a [December press release](#) stated that he dedicated 54 percent of the state’s general fund to pre-K through postsecondary education. Specifically, he wanted to budget \$6.39 billion to help school districts “continue their efforts to improve success, keep class sizes reasonable and school doors open for a full year,” and, in light of the economic crisis, intended to use about \$160 million from the state’s education reserve fund to maintain progress for the second year of the biennium.

However, Kulongoski said in his January 12 address that the budget presented in December was based on a November revenue forecast. “You and I both know that’s not where we are right now,” he added, and said that there would be an updated forecast in March, for which he predicted even lower numbers.

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events both in Washington, DC and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. The Alliance for Excellent Education is a nonprofit organization working to make it possible for America’s six million at-risk middle and high school students to achieve high standards and graduate prepared for college and success in life.