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President-Elect Obama's Choice for Secretary of Education: Arne Duncan

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Tuesday, December 16, President-elect Obama announced his choice for Secretary of Education: Arne Duncan.

BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE

A native of Chicago, Arne Duncan graduated with a sociology degree from

Harvard in 1987. He was a co-captain of Harvard's basketball team, and played professional basketball in Australia for several years.¹ He then returned to Chicago to run the Ariel Education Initiative, which "seeks to create outstanding educational opportunities for inner-city children."² He moved to the Chicago Public Schools in 1998, and rose quickly to become the Chief Executive Officer in 2001, a position he still holds. His commitment to the Chicago school system is promising to many. Chicago is the third-largest school district in the nation with more than 400,000 students. (As a point of comparison, there are 465,000 students in the entire state of Arkansas.)

SIGNAL OF OBAMA'S PREFERENCES IN EDUCATION

While there are a variety of philosophies on K-12 education, many have cast this debate as a clash between two "camps" with completely different views. We might call the first camp "reformers," *i.e.*, those arguing that substantial change is required to impact the education system. These reforms include school choice and merit pay. The second group is comprised of more traditional education interests who strive to enhance the current public school system. These groups generally support improved resources and programs as well as initiatives that enhance the professionalization of teachers. Candidate Obama did not clearly align himself with one camp or the other. On one

hand, Obama has praised various school reforms, such as charter schools, and has even hinted that he would be willing to consider merit pay or vouchers. On the other hand, Obama has denounced No Child Left Behind as forcing children to fill in bubbles on standardized tests.

As a result, many were hoping that Obama's choice for Secretary of Education would clearly define him as being in one "camp" or the other. Perhaps disappointing to some, Obama's choice of Arne Duncan indicates that Obama intends to maintain a centrist mix of positions. Indeed, when President-elect Obama announced Duncan's selection, he expressly praised Duncan for not being " beholden to any one ideology."

For example, Duncan signed the Education Equality Project's manifesto, which announces a focus on "accountability for results; and maximizing parents' options."³ Obama noted that Duncan has "championed good charter schools – even when it was controversial. He's shut down failing schools and replaced their entire staffs – even when it was unpopular."⁴ *The Los Angeles Times* adds that Arne Duncan is known for "Renaissance 2010, a program to close and redevelop low-performing neighborhood schools. Under Duncan's watch, hundreds of teachers have lost their jobs when he overhauled struggling schools and forced the staff members to reapply for their positions."⁵

On the other hand, Duncan signed the "Broader, Bolder" education manifesto. This "manifesto" criticizes No Child Left Behind and states that education policy should pay more attention to "early learning, parenting, health, [and] poverty."⁶ Obama has praised Duncan for such school initiatives as working "tirelessly to improve teacher quality, increasing the number of master teachers who've completed a rigorous national certification process from 11 to just shy of 1,200, and rewarding school leaders and teachers for gains in student achievement."

SUPPORT FROM ALL SIDES

The current administration and teacher organizations are often at odds on education issues. Yet Arne Duncan has been praised by both sides. Margaret Spellings, the current Secretary of Education, said that Duncan is “a terrific school leader. I consider him a fellow reformer and someone who cares deeply about students.”⁷ The National Education Association issued a press release praising Duncan’s “commitment to quality public schools” as leading to a “promising new period for public education in this country,” as shown by Duncan’s call for “doubling funding for No Child Left Behind, and tempering the law’s teach-to-the-test rigidity.”⁸

A PRAGMATIC CHOICE

President-elect Obama’s choice of Arne Duncan appears to be yet another sign that Obama prefers pragmatism over attachment to a particular ideology.

Indeed, neither the public school "reformers" nor the public school "supporters" may be able to claim Duncan as their own. Instead, he is reputed to be willing to employ whatever strategy is necessary to best address a problem. And he has certainly shown an ability to work with people from a variety of perspectives by leading one of our nation’s largest school systems with 44,000 employees and a budget of \$4.6 billion for an almost unheard-of (for big city superintendents) tenure of 7 years. During Duncan’s time as leader of the district, the fraction of Chicago elementary students testing at the proficient level has nearly doubled, jumping from 38 percent to 67 percent. In the end, if Duncan can remain pragmatic and independent of any particular ideology, he will have the freedom to address pressing problems in education with a wide array of strategies and potential solutions. And our students will be better off as a result.

References

¹<http://www.cps.k12.il.us/AboutCPS/people/Duncan/duncan.html>.

²<http://www.cps.k12.il.us/AboutCPS/people/Duncan/duncan.html>.

³ <http://www.educationequalityproject.org/list/about/>.

⁴ Obama’s remarks are available at http://change.gov/newsroom/entry/president_elect_obama_nominates_arne_duncan_as_secretary_of_education/.

⁵ James Janega and Carlos Sadovi, “Obama to pick Arne Duncan as Education secretary,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/news/politics/la-na-education16-2008dec16.0.250748.story>.

⁶ <http://www.boldapproach.org/statement.html>.

⁷ Fran Spielman, “Bush Aide: Duncan Would Make Good Education Secretary,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, Dec. 12, 2008, <http://www.suntimes.com/news/education/1327612.CST-NWS-duncan12.article>.

⁸ <http://www.nea.org/newsreleases/2008/nr081216.html>.

Before becoming the official Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan will have a hearing before the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, a vote by that committee, and then a full Senate vote.



Past Secretaries of Education

Name	Term of Office	President(s) served under
Shirley Hufstедler	1979 - 1981	Jimmy Carter
Terrel Bell	1981 - 1985	Ronald Reagan
William J. Bennett	1985 - 1988	Ronald Reagan
Lauro Cavazos	1988 - 1990	Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush
Lamar Alexander	1991 - 1993	George H. W. Bush
Richard Riley	1993 - 2001	Bill Clinton
Roderick Paige	2001 - 2005	George W. Bush
Margaret Spellings	2005 - 2008	George W. Bush