



December 24, 2008

Education in the Obama Administration

By John R. LaPlante

President-elect Barack Obama has finished putting together his cabinet, which includes a new secretary of education, Arne Duncan. This appointment will likely mean some modest changes that could bear fruit down the road—and certainly more federal spending on what has traditionally been a matter for state and local governments.

Mr. Duncan is currently the superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools. With roughly 410,000 students, it is the third-largest district in the country. By comparison, just under 419,000 students attend grades 1 through 12 in Kansas public schools.

What does the new secretary think about some of the key issues in education?

The biggest issue facing federal lawmakers is No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Duncan has taken all sides of the issue. He supports the concept of the law, which appeals to the law's backers. But he also favors giving states more flexibility in how they comply with it, which appeals to school district managers as some political conservatives. He also favors doubling the money (currently \$28 billion) that the federal government spends on the law. That appeals to teacher unions.

NCLB requires schools to make progress towards universal proficiency by 2014, but states have the power to create their own proficiency standards. Some have dumbed-down the standards, which has helped more schools comply with the law. Duncan advocates a national standard, but that would take the federal government further into the education business, which is not a wise idea.

To his credit, Duncan has been a reformer in teacher pay and recruitment. Some Chicago schools participate in a pilot program to give teachers bonuses tied to student performance. That's the good news. He also has, however, pushed Chicago teachers to get certificated by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Teachers who go through that program get a pay increase, but whether it actually increases their effectiveness is an open question.

Duncan has also been a fan of Teach for America, a national program that places liberal arts graduates in urban schools. Over 300 of its graduates, whose training is a refreshing alternative to the often stultifying schools of education, have taught in Chicago Public Schools.

The Flint Hills Center for Public Policy has consistently called for Kansas to be smarter in the way it uses charter schools, which are public schools that have some freedom from district and state laws. Duncan is a fan of charter schools.

One key part of the charter school model is that no school should be allowed to fail year after year. If a charter school doesn't live up to its end of the bargain, it's closed. Duncan has acted on this logic, closing failing schools, sometimes re-opening them with new staff as charter schools. Sometimes that's the best way to deal with persistent failure.

Duncan favors two other reforms that could pay dividends down the road. The first is to create smaller schools, which have been shown to boost student achievement.

The second reform is "weighted student funding," a method of budgeting that cuts out some school district overhead by giving more responsibility to school principals.

How much influence will Duncan have? It's hard to say. Much depends on what members of Congress think, the people who fill the subordinate positions in the Department of Education, and what the permanent bureaucracy does.

Over 90 percent of all school funding is allocated by state and local units of government, which means that Kansas lawmakers and citizens still have a significant say in what happens in the state. In a federal system, that's the way it should be.

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