



‘Quality Education Is Our Moon Shot’:

KAPPAN: Whenever we embark on any project, we’re always encouraged to “begin with the end in mind,” so that’s where I want to start this interview. The last Administration will be forever tagged with No Child Left Behind as its legacy. When Arne Duncan and Barack Obama leave Washington in four years or eight years, what do you hope folks will be saying about what you contributed to education?

DUNCAN: Well, the President has drawn a line in the sand. He has said that by 2020, we want to again have the largest percentage of college graduates in the world. We used to have that a couple of decades ago. We’ve lost our way. We’ve flat lined. Other countries have passed us by. That’s our Moon shot.

But we have to get dramatically better to get there. That’s the goal. We’re going to push as hard as we can to hit that goal. The President and I both believe that we have to educate our way to a better economy. It’s the only way we’re going to get there.

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Achieving a quality education for all children is the civil rights issue of our generation. We have to give children a chance to fulfill their potential and be successful. And the way to do that is by giving them quality educational opportunities.

That means that we have to reduce the dropout rate significantly. We have to increase the graduation rate. We have to make sure that the students who graduate are prepared to go on to be successful in some form of higher education, whether it’s a two-year college, a four-year university, vocational, or technical training.

We want to get dramatically better in every piece of the education continuum: early childhood, K-12, higher ed as well. It’s an ambitious agenda, but we think it’s all critically important.

KAPPAN: Is there one phrase that you could use to describe what you just said?

DUNCAN: We want to become the most educated country in the world. That’s the goal.

THE FUTURE OF NCLB

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KAPPAN: I want to talk about the reauthorization of ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act). As you make plans to move ahead with that, I want to know how you think you can change No Child Left Behind from what many perceive to be a test-and-punish law to a law that is really focused on improving student learning?

JOAN RICHARDSON is editor-in-chief of *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine.

DUNCAN: Let me start by telling you what I like about No Child Left Behind. I always try to give the previous Administration credit for its focus on the achievement gap and its use of disaggregating student data.

As a country, we used to sweep that conversation under the rug and not talk about the tremendous disparities in outcomes between white children and African-American and Latino children. Forevermore, we will keep that front and center.

I think that's an important conversation. It's sometimes uncomfortable. It's sometimes tough.

So, they were very loose on the goal but very prescriptive on how you get there. Very tight on that. I think that's backwards. I want to fundamentally flip that on its head.

We want common, career-ready, college-ready standards that would be internationally benchmarked. We would let people be creative and innovative about how they get to those standards, but we'd hold them accountable for results. Have people at the local level figure out the best way to get there.

I often joke that before I came to Washington, I didn't believe that the all of the good ideas came out

An Interview with Secretary of Education **Arne Duncan**

But, as a country, we have a tremendous achievement gap that we have to continue to close. Having transparency around that and challenging ourselves to both raise the bar and close the gap is hugely important.

Having said that, there are things that need to change pretty fundamentally. The opportunity that we have is to be very pragmatic. If it worked, then let's keep it. If it didn't work, then let's blue sky it and think in very different ways.

First, as you know, No Child Left Behind was dramatically underfunded. We've put over \$100 billion into education. While it's never enough, it's a huge investment.

Achieving a quality education for all children is the civil rights issue of our generation.

Second, from a management standpoint, you have to figure out what you manage loose and what you manage tight. I think they got this one fundamentally backwards. NCLB was very, very loose on the goals. So there are 50 different goal posts, 50 different measurements at the state level.

And the vast majority of those got dummied down due to political pressure. In some states, including my state of Illinois, we're actually lying to children. When you tell the parent that their child is meeting the 'state standard,' the logical assumption is that they're on track to be successful.

I would argue that, in many places, the standard has been dummied down so much that those children who are just meeting the standard are barely able to graduate from high school and absolutely inadequately prepared to go on to a competitive four-year university, much less graduate.



Courtesy U.S. Department of Education

of Washington. Now that I'm in Washington, I know that all of the good ideas don't come out of Washington. The best ideas are always going to come at the local level.

So fundamentally, we want to be loose and tight. To become tight on the goals but to allow people to become much more entrepreneurial, much more creative, innovative to get there.

I also worry a lot about the narrowing of the cur-



Associated Press/Charles Bennett

riculum under No Child Left Behind. Too many schools are focusing on just what's tested so there's a loss of P.E., music, art, the nontested subjects, even science in some places.

THE FOUR REFORMS

Secretary Arne Duncan and President Barack Obama have pledged federal money to four central areas of reform that they believe will drive school improvement:

- Adopt internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace;
- Recruit, develop, retain, and reward effective teachers and principals;
- Build data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals how they can improve their practices; and
- Turn around the lowest-performing schools.

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It's so important that all children at the early ages have exposure to those things. That's how children develop their skills and discover their passions. I worry particularly about disadvantaged children who don't have those opportunities in their homes or their communities. The only place they're going to have access to art or drama or music is in school. So how are we going to think differently about that? How are we going to make sure that we're giving all children a well-rounded education from the earliest ages on?

Then, finally, to your original starting point: No Child Left Behind did a lot of labeling of schools as failures. I'm much more interested in gain and growth than in absolute test scores. There were a lot of schools that were labeled as failures that were actually improving every year. That was wrong. That's tremendously demoralizing to staff and confusing to parents. That needs to be corrected.

No Child Left Behind is what I would call a blunt instrument. Schools that were improving got labeled as failures. Schools that were struggling didn't get the help that they needed. Schools at the bottom that need to be fundamentally and absolutely transformed got incremental help, which doesn't get us where we need to go.

If we have a much more finely tuned instrument that would understand those really important distinctions between schools, it would help us dramatically improve student outcomes. It would help us turn around schools that need dramatic, fundamental change and do it with a real sense of urgency.

URBAN DISTRICTS

KAPPAN: You came into this job with dramatically different on-the-ground experience than most of your predecessors in this job. You had some demonstrated success in a very challenged urban district. What do you say to other urban superintendents about where they begin the hard work of improving student learning in those districts? How do you create systems of success? Where do you start?

DUNCAN: It's very complex, but it starts with real leadership at the top. You have to have strong, courageous leadership. You can't do anything without that. You have to rally the entire community behind these efforts. I've argued that if it's just the school system by itself trying to get better, you're not going to get there. You need the business community, the philanthropic community, the religious community; you need the not-for-profits, you need the parks and recreation, health and human services. This has to be citywide effort. You cannot have a world-class city without a world-class school system.

You've seen a series of mayors — Mayor

(Richard) Daley in Chicago, Mayor (Michael) Bloomberg in New York, Mayor (Adrian) Fenty here in Washington — provide real leadership at the top to rally an entire city, not just the school district by itself.

Leadership at the top, all hands on deck, everyone pushing hard in the right direction, and a commitment for the long haul. None of this is about an overnight success. You have to be willing to stick with it. But I can't imagine a more important activity for a city and one that a city can rally behind than dramatically improving the quality of public education.

It combines a real sense of self-interest. If you want to attract and retain jobs, you have to have an educated workforce. And the sense of altruism that our children deserve more than what we're giving them.

At the end of the day, it brings together a set of interests.

You cannot have a world-class city without a world-class school system.

MAYORAL CONTROL

KAPPAN: I assume that all of the ideas that are in your plan, all of the ideas in the Obama plan for education, that all of those are driven by your belief that they will improve student learning.

DUNCAN: Yes, absolutely. That's what it's all about, driving student achievement. It's about closing the gap and raising the bar.

KAPPAN: Let's tick through some of those ideas and help me make the link between those ideas and improving student learning. You touched on mayoral control, so let's start there. What's the connection between mayoral control and improving student learning?

DUNCAN: It's not always the right answer. It's a piece of an answer. It's not a magic bullet. In some places, it might be the wrong answer. But I would argue that in large urban cities with a history of fairly dysfunctional school systems, the work is so hard and the challenges so intractable that you have to have strong leadership at the top to give you a chance to get there.

It doesn't guarantee success, but it puts you in the ball game. The problem is so large, the needs are so great that everyone in the city needs to rally around the effort.

The best person I can think of to rally all those different sectors together to achieve that is the mayor.

ARNE DUNCAN

POSITION: U.S. Secretary of Education.

Oversees a staff of 4,200 employees and a budget of \$62.6 billion in regular FY 2009 discretionary appropriations and \$96.8 billion in discretionary funding provided under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Operates programs that touch every area and level of education — elementary and secondary programs annually serve nearly 14,000 school districts and about 56 million students attending some 98,000 public schools and 34,000 private schools. Department programs also provide grant, loan, and work-study assistance to more than 13 million postsecondary students.

AGE: 45

EDUCATION: Graduated magna cum laude from Harvard University with a bachelor's degree in sociology, 1987. Senior thesis: "The Values, Aspirations and Opportunities of the Urban Underclass" (unpublished) which he wrote after taking a year off and working at his mother's education center in Chicago. Attended University of Chicago Laboratory School, a private school that President Obama's children later attended.

PROFESSIONAL HISTORY: Played professional basketball with the Eastside Spectres in Australia, 1987 to 1991. Returned to Chicago in 1992 to run the Ariel Education Initiative, which helped fund a college education as part of the I Have a Dream program. Joined the Chicago Public Schools in 1998 as deputy chief of staff to then-CEO Paul Vallas. Replaced Vallas in 2001 and served as CEO for seven years. Became Secretary of Education in January 2009.

FAMILY: Wife, Karen, and two children (Claire, 7, Ryan, 4). Claire attends a public school in Northern Virginia. Mother, Sue Duncan, runs the Sue Duncan Children's Center (sueduncanchildrenscenter.org), an independent early-learning center on Chicago's South Side; father, the late Starkey Duncan Jr., was a psychology professor at the University of Chicago and a leading researcher in the study of nonverbal and verbal interactions.

PERSONAL: 6'5" tall. Plays basketball with the President. Grew up without a television at home.

This is not “let a thousand flowers bloom.”

CHARTER SCHOOLS

KAPPAN: Same question related to charter schools. By the way, in the Gallup Poll, charter schools got a lot of support, even though people still seem to be confused by exactly what they are. (See Tables 11 and 12 on Page 13.)

DUNCAN: I’ve always said I’m not a fan of charters, I’m a fan of good charters.

Three things have to happen for charter schools to

be successful. First, you have to have a very high bar for entry. This is not “let a thousand flowers bloom.” I would argue that there are far too many low-performing charters. We had a lot of charters in Chicago, but I closed three charter schools because they weren’t performing.

The chance to educate our kids is like a sacred obligation. You really need to have a very clear vetting process so you’re only allowing the best of the best to do that.

Once you’ve done that, two other things have to happen. You have to give these schools real autonomy. These are by definition educational entrepreneurs who have a different vision of education. You have to free them from the bureaucracy and give them the chance to innovate and create.

Third, you have to tie that autonomy to real accountability. We had five-year performance contracts. If they’re not performing, you need to close them down.

When those three things happen, you can have remarkable, remarkable results for children. It’s a piece of the answer. It’s by no means the whole answer.

I’m fighting the fight against those folks who say there should never be a tie between student achievement and teacher performance.

MERIT PAY

KAPPAN: Another question that we asked in the Gallup Poll was about merit pay. We found that there was very high public support for merit pay

(Table 14 on Page 15). Are you surprised by that? Why do you think there was so much support? To the bigger question, why do you think that could be a lever for improving student learning?

DUNCAN: In education, we’ve been so scared to talk about excellence. I don’t understand that. Great teachers and great principals make a tremendous difference in students’ lives. Talent matters tremendously in education. Great teachers and great principals are the unsung heroes in our society. They perform miracles every day. They change student lives on a daily basis.

Somehow as a country, we’ve been scared to talk about that. In every other sector, in your world, in the media, business, sports, entertainment, music, excellence gets recognized. It gets rewarded. You learn from it. It gets replicated. In education, we’re scared to do that. We have to do a much better job of identifying, rewarding, recognizing, spotlighting, and learning from excellence.

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Nobody goes into education to make a million dollars. People go into education for the most altruistic of reasons. They want to make a difference. It’s a phenomenally committed group of folks. But there’s no reason we can’t provide some recognition for those who go beyond the call of duty every day and make a huge difference in students’ lives. I don’t think we can do enough of that. There’s a lot that we can do, not just at the individual teacher level, but at the school level.

When I see a high-performing school, it’s every adult in the building working together. It’s not just the teachers and the principal, it’s the custodians, the security guards, the social workers, the lunchroom attendants; they’re all working hard and working together. We need to know who’s doing a great job and shine a spotlight on them.

KAPPAN: Your proposal is to tie those pay increases into teacher evaluations and to testing data.

DUNCAN: Well, that’s a piece of it. Teachers are concerned that that will be the only measure. I couldn’t agree more. It should never be the only measure.

I’m fighting the reverse fight. I’m fighting the fight against those folks who say there should never



Associated Press/Manuel Balce Ceneta

be a tie between student achievement and teacher performance.

There are actually states that prohibit linking student data with teacher data. (Editor's note: California prohibits using its teacher-identification database for making decisions about teacher pay, promotion, evaluation, and other employment issues. New York prohibits using student achievement data in making tenure decisions.) That, to me, is stunning. That totally devalues the profession. It basically says that teaching doesn't matter, that anybody can do this. We know there's tremendous variation there. In those situations, everyone loses. Teachers who are successful don't get rewarded. Teachers who are struggling don't get the support that they need. Teachers who shouldn't be teaching don't get moved out. So every adult loses. And when the adults lose, guess what? The children lose, too. That doesn't make sense to me.

So we're creating significant incentives to encourage folks to think about this in a different way.

GRADING THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

DUNCAN: Here's another Gallup result that I think is fascinating. This is the most remarkable finding. Everyone thinks their own school is good and that everybody else's school is bad. That's a constant theme. (See Tables 2, 3, and 4 on Page 11.)

KAPPAN: Why do you think that exists?

DUNCAN: Too many people don't understand how bad their own schools are. They always think it's somebody else's kid who's not being educated. They don't understand that it's their own kid who's being short-changed. That's part of our challenge. How do you awaken the public to believe that your own kid isn't getting what they need and you don't know it. If they would wake up, they could be part of the change. We need to wake them up.

DUNCAN AND SPORTS

KAPPAN: OK, last question. This is the basketball question, but I'm not going to ask you whom you're playing, where you're playing, and who's winning. But talking about basketball is a required part of every interview with you, right?

DUNCAN: Absolutely.

KAPPAN: I'm assuming again that basketball, sports, played a big part in your life as you were growing up, or you wouldn't have gone on to do what you did, playing basketball at Harvard, playing professional basketball in Australia after graduation.

In this test-crazy environment where, as you noted, so many things are being lost at schools,

what's the role of competitive athletics in schools today? What role do you think that ought to play in a kid's education?



Courtesy U.S. Department of Education

DUNCAN: Sports can be a tremendous vehicle for teaching students really important life lessons. When you talk about student athletes, as long as that student piece is kept front and center, I think great things can happen. Too often, it gets flipped and becomes athlete first and student second. That has a very damaging impact on students. I worry about the skewed or warped sense of priorities and values there.

But when it's kept in perspective, the life lessons that you can learn on the court or the playing field — hard work, selflessness, teamwork, working for the greater good, not about yourself — those life lessons can be hugely important. I absolutely believe that I would not be doing what I'm doing today if I had not had a chance to learn those lessons. For me, that was on the basketball court.

With the proper coaching in the right context with a laser-like focus on academics first and sports being the carrot, the reward for good academic work, I think sports can have a huge and positive role.

What I worry about are adults living their own dreams through students and chasing a dream of going pro. When students don't focus academically, that ends up dooming a kid to academic failure.

It can be a tool for good or it can be really destructive to children, depending on the quality and character of the adults who are engaged with those children.

KAPPAN: And I won't ask you who wins when you play horse.

DUNCAN: (Laughs) I plead the fifth.

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