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Schooled For the Job

Will Arne Duncan's temperament and Chicago experience be enough to win over those skeptical of the Obama education agenda? P. 592

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America's New Principal

Arne Duncan says he'll find 'the best and brightest' to help him reinvent schools and boost early childhood education — and a wide range of backers are eager to give him a shot

BY LYDIA GENSHEIMER

ARNE DUNCAN measures success incrementally, but that doesn't mean he sets his sights low, or that he is willing to settle. That's especially the case when it comes to education.

As a child, playing basketball was Duncan's reward for doing his homework. At six-foot-five, he was a natural by the time he entered Harvard. Yet it was his classroom achievement and reputation as a team player that won him recognition as an academic All-America and led his teammates to select him player of the year as a senior in 1987, when the squad went 9-17.

A decade later, Duncan shepherded a van packed with teenagers and their parents, luggage and new computers from their South Chicago homes to a college 700 miles away in Talladega, Ala. For six years, he and his sister,

Sarah, had mentored a group of 40 students, who were told their college expenses would be paid if they finished high school. Duncan worked to keep the kids on track, and he would show up on their doorsteps in the impoverished neighborhood when they weren't behaving. Thirty-five graduated — compared with a third of the kids in the grade ahead.

Four years later, Duncan was named chief executive of the Chicago Public Schools. He hewed then to the same hands-on approach that guided his mentoring endeavor, visiting a different school almost every day, personally returning calls from teachers, union heads and parents, and shooting hoops with kids across the city. He raised the graduation rate of the nation's third-largest school system, with more than 400,000 students, every year he was in charge.

Now, he has come to Washington as the close friend and intellectual compatriot of

President Obama — and his sometime adversary on the basketball court — to take charge of reinventing the U.S. system of public schooling as the newly minted secretary of Education. Duncan has an ambitious mandate, articulated by the president last week, to reshape early childhood programs, boost the teaching profession, emphasize accountability, raise school performance standards, and promote the use of charter schools and other non-traditional means of education.

"Let there be no doubt: The future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens," Obama told an audience of the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Washington. "The relative decline of American education is untenable for our economy, unsustainable for our

democracy and unacceptable for our children. And we cannot afford to let it continue."

Duncan is widely regarded as a pragmatist and consensus builder, and his selection by Obama for the Cabinet has been praised by educators, union officials and lawmakers from both ends of the political spectrum. That has elevated expectations that Duncan might be able to bring together conflicting viewpoints and find ways to repair an education system widely regarded as in serious disrepair.

"If there's no other issue that everyone can agree on, this is the one where there can be absolute consensus, that the status quo is not good enough," Duncan said in an interview.

But the challenges are significant. And

MUTUAL GOALS: Miller, left, and Duncan, who appeared last week at a Washington conference on data collection in public schools, share a desire to improve the use of statistics to assess student achievement and measure school performance.

his success at achieving the administration's goals is likely to depend on his ability to push incremental change, rather than attempting a comprehensive overhaul. Duncan faces entrenched interests that will protest much of what he's after, no matter how careful the approach. He will undoubtedly disappoint those who would prefer a more systemic reinvention of the nation's educational structure. And many of his — and Obama's — initiatives, such as pumping federal dollars into performance pay programs and charter schools, are

likely to run into resistance within his own political party.

Duncan's toughest challenge, though, will be to raise the bar for the education system, which has been steadily and significantly slipping compared with those of other countries. Despite spending more per capita on education than any other country, the United States ranks ninth among industrialized nations in the percentage of the population aged 25-34 with a high school diploma. In Chicago, despite recent gains attributed to Duncan's own efforts, the graduation rate still hovers under 60 percent — well below the national average.

The secretary sounds undeterred. "We are at a time of both economic and, I would ar-



CO / SCOTT J. FERRELL



HANDS ON: Duncan, who was principal for a day at this Chicago elementary school in 2004, was well regarded in the city for his attention to the community.

gue, educational crisis, and we have to get dramatically better,” Duncan said. “I love that challenge. I thrive in those types of challenges.”

EMBRACING ‘ZERO TO FIVE’

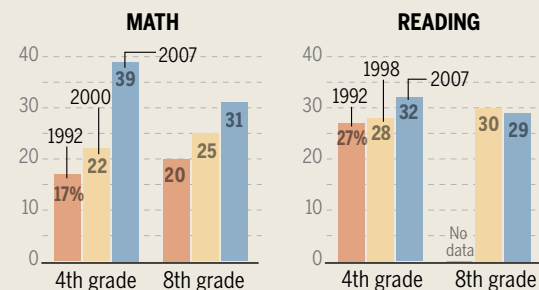
Duncan, who was born in 1964, spent most of his boyhood afternoons at the after-school program founded and run by his mother on Chicago’s South Side. Situated not far from the Hyde Park neighborhood that includes the University of Chicago (and what is now the Obamas’ second home), the Sue Duncan Children’s Center remains a refuge for children in the areas of North Kenwood and Oakland.

The free program provides an educational and recreational outlet, and when Duncan was younger 90 percent of the children who attended came from families on welfare. His mother would tote 25 pounds of apples and three pounds of cheese to the center each day so the kids wouldn’t go hungry. She would also bring her children — Arne, Sarah and their brother, Owen — after their day ended at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools a few blocks away. Several times a year, police would pull over the car to ask if the white family was lost in the gang-infested black neighborhood.

“We went from our middle-class home, an intellectual environment, to what was then not politically incorrect to call the ghetto,”

Modest Gains

National Assessment of Educational Progress tests show some recent improvements in elementary school academic performance. Even so, only about a third of fourth- and eighth-grade students are gauged “proficient” in both reading and math.



NOTE: The Education Department defines “proficient” performance as demonstrating “competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter.”

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics

Owen Duncan recalls. “You start asking the questions real early. Why is it like this?”

The key to equalizing opportunity through education, Arne Duncan says, is leveling the playing field as early in life as possible. It’s a lesson he says he learned by experiencing the contrast between the private and prestigious Lab Schools and his mother’s center. It’s the lesson that drives his desire to overhaul federal assistance for early childhood education.

“When she was able to get babies and one-year-olds and two-year-olds into her program — to see them at 10, 11, 12 was amazing,” Duncan said. “And then to see the kids who

came to her at 10, 11, and 12, and how far behind they were. It was the same kids, same neighborhood, same socio-economic challenges, same poverty, but this absolute divergence in outcomes.”

Obama has pledged to invest \$10 billion a year in a “Zero to Five” plan to encourage states to enact quality early education programs; increase allocations for Head Start, which provides education and social services to low-income preschool children; and quadruple the number of children eligible for Early Head Start, which provides services for low-income families with infants and toddlers.

In a departure from current practice, the Education Department will probably take the lead in designing early education policies. Obama’s initial budget proposal, unveiled last month, calls for the creation of early learning challenge grants for states to be handed out by Education — not the Department of Health and Human Services, long the home to both Head Start and Early Head Start.

Duncan said he will work closely with HHS to alter a relationship that “has been less than functional historically” — a reference, perhaps, to the unsuccessful and bruising attempt by President George W. Bush to transfer early childhood programs to Education from HHS.

For Obama’s early learning grants to gain traction, however, Republicans say Duncan’s department must not dictate practices to states and must coordinate with, not duplicate, other federal early education programs.

But there are clear signs the Education Department will increase its emphasis on issues concerning early childhood development. Barbara Bowman, co-founder of the Erikson Institute graduate school in early childhood education and head of the Chicago school system’s early childhood initiative, is serving as a consultant to the department. Bowman’s daughter, Valerie Jarrett, is one of the president’s top White House advisers.

“Arne is the type of person who allows his actions to speak for him,” said Paul Vallas, Chi-

cago’s schools chief before Duncan and current head of the Recovery School District in New Orleans. “Early childhood education has been a major priority. It wasn’t a revelation; it’s just been a standard component of school reform in Chicago.”

During his time running the Chicago schools, Duncan increased by several thousand the number of children between 3 and 5 enrolled in early childhood programs. He also gave parents a choice of where they sent their kids to preschool — including independent early childhood centers.

WANTED: MORE GOOD TEACHERS

Duncan took a year off before his last year at Harvard to work at his mother’s center while researching and writing his senior thesis in sociology, which described an underclass in Chicago that faced towering challenges but had great potential. He wrote of students who believed their teachers had done too little to help them succeed and characterized the school system as designed to produce failure.

Once in charge of those schools, Duncan drove an effort to recruit and retain better teachers. The number of teacher applicants has tripled since 2003 to about 10 for each position. He went on recruiting trips, supported alternative certification programs and raised the bar for would-be principals. The number of National Board-certified teachers, who must meet rigorous standards, grew by more than 1,100 on his watch. There were 11 a decade ago.

From the start, Duncan faced criticism, which persists today, from the teachers’ ranks for never having held a traditional teaching position. But he sought to tamp down such criticism in Chicago by using teachers not only as a sounding board for his ideas but as partners in developing policy.

“The respect was there in Chicago,” said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. “He started in a place that was very top-down, and he moved to do things with the union and with the teachers that really work for kids.”

Kris Reichmann, a former Chicago teacher who is now executive director of the Chicago Foundation for Education, said Duncan brought along his entire senior leadership team to meet with a group of teachers in the foundation’s teacher fellowship program. “For Arne to listen and to be responsive and to be interested just demonstrates that he truly is looking for ways to listen and to learn from what people are saying and to turn that

ARNE STARKEY DUNCAN

(first name pronounced “R-nee”)

Born: Nov. 6, 1964, in Chicago

Parents: Starkey Duncan Jr., a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago, deceased ■ Susan Duncan, founder and director of the Sue Duncan Children’s Center that serves Chicago’s North Kenwood and Oakland neighborhoods.

Family: Married to Karen Duncan, whom he met while playing basketball in Australia and who was most recently athletic director at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools ■ Daughter, Clare, 7, and son, Ryan, 4.

Education: University of Chicago Laboratory Schools ■ Harvard University, B.A. magna cum laude 1987 ■ Wrote sociology thesis titled “The Values, Aspirations and Opportunities of the Urban Underclass” ■ Basketball co-captain and first-team Academic All-America as a senior.

Employment: Social worker for the Tasmanian government and professional basketball player in Australia, 1987-91 ■ Director of the Ariel Education Initiative in Chicago, which supports educational programs in economically disadvantaged areas and was founded by John Rogers Jr., a boyhood friend and the ex-husband of Desiree Rogers, now White House social secretary, 1992-98 ■ Deputy chief of staff, Chicago Public Schools, 1998-2001 ■ Chief executive, Chicago Public Schools, 2001-08.

Basketball: Played with Craig Robinson, Michelle Obama’s brother, in three-on-three tournaments in the early 1990s ■ Also played with Obama friend and presidential campaign treasurer Martin Nesbitt ■ Has played regularly with Obama since they met in the early 1990s, including on Election Day 2008 and at least once since coming to Washington ■ Is known for playing in tough neighborhoods and is often the only white player on the court. John Rogers describes an incident from three years ago at an inner-city gym where a fight broke out. “One of the guys on the other team punched Arne, and Arne was normal, calm, collected. . . . Everyone else in the gym came to Arne’s defense right away. There is so much respect for Arne in the inner-city communities of Chicago.”



HOOP DREAMS: Duncan, shown during a close loss to Duke in 1984, has long made basketball an integral part of his personal connections, including his ties to Obama.

around from a policy standpoint,” Reichmann said.

In 2005, Duncan began the Drive Award to recognize roughly two dozen top teachers each year from across the city. He met with the group for two hours each month and invited

them to his twice-yearly senior staff retreat.

As Education secretary, Duncan said, he intends to recruit a generation of the “best and the brightest” to teaching by expanding programs such as Teach for America and encouraging people to enter the profession from other industries through alternative certification programs. “We can recruit the next generation of extraordinarily smart, talented, committed young people to become teachers,” he said.

“What I see as our ability to recruit and train and retain great talent over the next four, five, six years is really going to shape public education in the country for the next 30. It’s a generational shift. So it’s a fascinating window of opportunity.”

Duncan has pledged to use money at his disposal to create incentives for top teachers to work in historically underserved communities. He wants veteran teachers to mentor younger ones — a model shaped off his mother’s center, where older children taught the younger ones.

LIMITED REVOLUTION

But those who yearn for an overhaul of the fundamental way most teachers are paid — in particular the tenure system — may be disappointed. Duncan does say that those

Urging Schools to ‘Race to the Top’

HE HAS BEEN IN OFFICE for not yet eight weeks, but Arne Duncan already has demonstrated that he will use federal money to promote one of his central objectives — a greater degree of equality in the nation’s public school classrooms, coupled with clear methods to measure whether his plan is working.

To that end, the new secretary of Education has been given a luxury never afforded his predecessors, a \$5 billion pot of money to spend as he sees fit, which he has dubbed a “Race to the Top” fund to give schools incentives to change their practices. This fund, about equal in size to the budget of the Chicago Public Schools where Duncan was chief executive for seven years, is part of \$98 billion in education and related spending enacted in February as part of the economic stimulus package.

How he spends the money will be a test of Duncan’s intention to shake up established notions of how schools pick teachers, train them and measure their success. And Duncan’s choices of which programs to reward are expected to run up against at least some opposition from teachers’ unions, among others.

But California Democrat George Miller, chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee and an enthusiastic Duncan booster, says President Obama and Duncan “were not going to give up the opportunity to push reforms, and they were not going to give away money without reform.”

Most of Duncan’s special fund, about \$4.4 billion, will go to some eight to 12 states that he decides have “made significant progress” toward his stated goals, including moving highly qualified teachers into economically disadvantaged schools, pursuing higher academic standards and enhancing the quality of student assessments. In addition, Duncan will try to assist state and local school systems to develop what are called longitudinal data systems to track student performance over time and give school administrators a more comprehensive tool for gauging which teachers are most successful. He intends to hand out some of the competitive grants by December and the balance by the summer of 2010.

The approach Duncan has taken with his \$5 billion fund reflects his primary focus — school and teacher accountability — said Joel I. Klein, chancellor of the New York City Public Schools, the largest system in the country. “You see the fingerprints of that all over the stimulus package,” Klein said.

Two decades ago, for his senior undergraduate thesis at Harvard University, Duncan assessed the disparate educations received by a suburban high school student and one from the inner city. Giving the best teachers incentives to work in the toughest urban and rural areas, he says now, is one way of closing that gap.

Duncan puts a great deal of emphasis on measuring success, in-

sisting that data provides the “foundation for driving reform.” His call for longitudinal data systems is intended not only to help educators track a student’s performance, but also to link the student’s performance to specific teachers and trace teachers’ success back to where they were trained.

It’s an idea that is likely to run up against strenuous opposition, especially when statistics are applied directly to make policy decisions. Marilyn Stewart, president of the Chicago Teachers’ Union, complains that when Duncan was schools chief, his team “only looked at the numbers” when it decided which schools to close. “There is a place for data, but teaching is more of an art than a science,” Stewart said.

“We know there are many, many people in the field who view data as their enemy,” conceded Miller, who shares Duncan’s belief in using empirical data for school assessments.

And Duncan says he won’t be deterred. His long-held view is that many lower-income students pass from one grade to another without being told whether or not they are prepared to enter a globally competitive job force. “Our competition is not down the block or in the state or in the country; our competition is India or China,” he said. “So, this idea of not just looking internally in

our country but looking at internationally benchmarked standards I think is really, really important.”

INNOVATION FUND

Beyond rewarding schools that meet his goals, Duncan intends to use \$650 million of the fund to finance innovations by schools and nonprofit organizations that have been shown to close the achievement gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students, with a goal of identifying and documenting best practices.

Duncan is convinced that the Education Department can spur changes — an idea that may seem at odds with the traditional functions of a large government bureaucracy.

“What I want to move is to take those pockets of excellence and to really scale those up,” Duncan said. “The real goal is to have this department really be the engine of innovation and to drive that kind of change and to take to scale what is happening. We have a huge ability to do that.”

At least some private groups, including those that might benefit from Duncan’s innovation fund, say he’s onto something. “The country is hungry for solutions that come outside of Washington,” said Eric Schwarz, president of Citizen Schools, a nonprofit organization based in Boston that operates after-school programs matching professionals with more than 4,000 middle schools students in seven states. “They are hungry for a ‘fund-what-works’ approach.”

A Duncan aide said any organization hoping to receive innovation fund dollars would have to show “unambiguous data” on how the organization has improved student achievement, including that of low-income kids.

— LYDIA GENSHEIMER

“We know there are many, many people in the field who view data as their enemy.”

— Rep. George Miller, D-Calif.

who aren’t making the grade may need to find another line of work. “If, at the end of the day, teachers aren’t cutting it, they need to find another profession,” he said, “because our children have one chance at an education.”

But at the same time he is unlikely to use his perch to ensure that poor performers are shown the door.

In Chicago, he never called for an overhaul of the teacher pay system in the way that, say, Michelle Rhee is proposing in the District of Columbia. Rhee would scrap tenure in exchange for almost doubling teachers’ salaries. Instead, Duncan joined forces with the teachers’ union, and implemented a five-year, \$27.5 million performance pay pilot program for bonuses to entire school staffs based on student achievement gains at historically underperforming schools.

Duncan’s pilot program was financed through the federal Teacher Incentive Fund, which was begun by the previous administration to provide money for just such local endeavors. Despite push-back from some Democrats, Duncan persuaded Congress to double the program’s annual budget through the economic stimulus law enacted last month. Obama wants to expand the performance pay model to 150 new school districts beyond the 34 programs currently operating.

Chairman George Miller of the House Education and Labor Committee, a longtime supporter of performance pay, said Duncan and Obama have effectively changed the debate on the issue in Washington. “Some issues that were so sharp-edged a year ago, some of those edges have been rounded off,” the California Democrat said.

Teachers’ unions, which didn’t object to Obama’s plan to increase performance pay pilot programs, may still pose an obstacle. They are likely to vigorously fight federal support for teacher compensation programs that largely tie pay to student testing results — a link Republicans say is necessary for an effective performance pay system.

“We would oppose compensation based on a test score,” said Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association. “That’s not the way you measure performance.”

Still, Republicans say Duncan may be able to accomplish what they have long yearned for: a movement away from a system where teacher pay is based off credentials and years in the classroom. “If he left here in four or eight years with a legacy of having dramatically increased the number of teachers in this



The Agenda Duncan’s Pushing

President Obama laid out an ambitious agenda for overhauling federal education policy during a March 10 address to the national Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. In the audience was Education Secretary Arne Duncan, a longtime friend and close adviser to Obama. The president called for:

EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVES

- Providing early-learning challenge grants to states that develop plans to raise the quality of early-education programs.
- Creating a program under which 55,000 first-time parents would receive visits at home from nurses (under the Department of Health and Human Services).
- Expanding Head Start and Early Head Start (also under HHS).

TEACHING AS A PROFESSION

- Recruiting a new generation of teachers and allowing teachers to enter the profession through alternative certification programs and non-traditional routes.
- Providing incentives for teachers who work in economically disadvantaged schools and for those who teach math and science.
- Expanding existing federal support for model programs that tie teacher compensation to measurements of performance.
- Establishing mentor programs where established teachers help train newer ones.

PUBLIC SCHOOL STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

- Giving states incentives to adopt internationally benchmarked academic standards.
- Insisting that states develop standards and assessments that measure problem-solving and critical thinking skills.
- Requiring that federal aid to states under the 2002 education law known as No Child Left Behind be tied to not yet specified measurements of school success.

INNOVATION IN ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

- Making states lift any caps on their maximum number of charter schools.
- Lengthening the school day and year by adding after-school and summer programs.
- Providing money for efforts to prevent lower-income students from dropping out.

ASSISTING HIGHER EDUCATION

- Simplifying the FAFSA, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, that all college students must use in seeking federally backed loans and other assistance.
- Increasing the maximum Pell grant award to \$5,550, indexing the grants to rise at a faster pace than inflation and making Pell grant spending mandatory — and no longer subject to appropriations that in the past limited awards.
- Making permanent a \$2,500-a-year college tuition tax credit that was included in the economic stimulus law as a temporary benefit.
- Eliminating subsidies to student loan providers under the Family Federal Education Loan program.
- Expanding the Perkins Loan Program that provides low-interest financing to needy students at specified post-secondary schools.



GOOD WILL HUNTING: Duncan, shown at his confirmation hearing in January with son, Ryan, and wife, Karen, has mostly drawn praise from both sides of the aisle.

country who are being paid more for their skills rather than just living a long time or going back to school, that would be a crowning achievement,” said Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, who was Education secretary himself from 1991 to 1993.

PUSHING FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Any controversy over testing and its use in setting teacher salaries will seem tame when it comes to the broader issue of gauging school success — and more particularly Duncan’s insistence on strict and detailed measurements that can be used to close schools and reorder the allocation of resources.

He inherits a department associated in the public’s eye with the unpopular education policy overhaul known as No Child Left Behind. That law, one of Bush’s signature domestic policy achievements, was rooted in a drive for holding schools accountable.

And while Duncan will have an opportunity to reshape and even rename the law, which is past due for an update, he shares an underlying belief in accountability with its authors that stretches back more than two decades, to when he worked with kids from

some of Chicago’s worst public schools.

In his thesis, Duncan describes tutoring a high school senior hoping to play Division I college basketball. Although the student was on the honor roll, he could barely write a complete sentence and was functionally illiterate. “He has learned almost nothing, as nothing is expected of him,” Duncan wrote. “He will get a diploma, but will not have received an education.”

To combat the phenomenon of children failing academically while being told they are succeeding, Duncan has begun to pressure states to implement “college-ready, career-ready, internationally benchmarked standards,” and to create “great assessments” to accompany the standards.

“What we need to do is to stop lying to children and families,” Duncan said. “We lead them to believe they are on the track or on a trajectory to success, and in fact they are not.”

The No Child law allows states wide leeway to measure school success, creating a system

of broadly variable expectations. Duncan says he will push for a more uniform approach, although his office says something less than a mandated federal standard.

In Chicago, Duncan’s accountability efforts were often met with resistance. He drew the ire of parents and teachers with his Renaissance 2010 initiative, which called for opening 100 high-performing schools by next year. So far, dozens of schools have been shuttered, and 74 have opened under the initiative.

“He is not a person that is overly concerned with politics or processes,” said Margaret Spellings, Education secretary for the previous four years, who praised her successor for closing underperforming schools.

Duncan has always worked hard to make sure the public understood why he made unpopular decisions such as closing schools, said John Rogers, a friend since childhood, which is why Duncan’s generally immune from criticism that his motives are selfish or opaque.

Democrat Danny K. Davis, who represents Chicago in the House, praised Duncan not only for listening to opponents of his plans but also for withstanding their sometimes volatile rhetoric. “The people of Chicago, they are not wallflowers,” Davis said. “And a lot

of times these things would go toe to toe, knocked down and dragged out. But Arne would hold his ground.”

FOCUSING ON ‘NO CHILD’

One critic is Marilyn Stewart, president of the Chicago Teachers Union. She sharply criticized the Renaissance 2010 plan, saying it is run by businessmen who base their decisions too heavily on statistics and too little on other considerations, such as the fact that many students at the worst-performing schools are homeless or even on parole. Even so, Stewart praised Duncan’s accessibility. “He would listen,” she said. “He absolutely is a team player, and I think that’s part of what drives him.”

And Joel I. Klein, chancellor of the New York City Public Schools, said Duncan learned an important rule during his school-closing rounds: It’s impossible to please everyone and accomplish major change. Klein, an assistant attorney general under President Bill Clinton, said that’s a lesson Duncan will need to remember in Washington. “My concerns are frankly that they need to be bold and vigilant,” Klein said of Duncan and Obama. “You learn that lesson if you close schools.”

Duncan’s work in Chicago indicates that he will bring together as many diverse views as possible while working to update No Child, which is the basic underlying law governing federal aid to elementary and secondary schools. Cleared by Congress at the end of 2001, it has been kept in force temporarily since it technically expired in 2007.

The administration and Congress are expected to begin work on a rewrite this year, and Duncan is likely to push for strong accountability measurements that take into account such elements as student academic growth over time.

Focusing on accountability through tests and demanding plenty of data to steer the debate may alienate teachers’ unions, but those positions will find allies of both parties in Congress. Chief among them may be newly appointed Sen. Michael Bennet, a Democrat who until January was head of the Denver Public Schools.

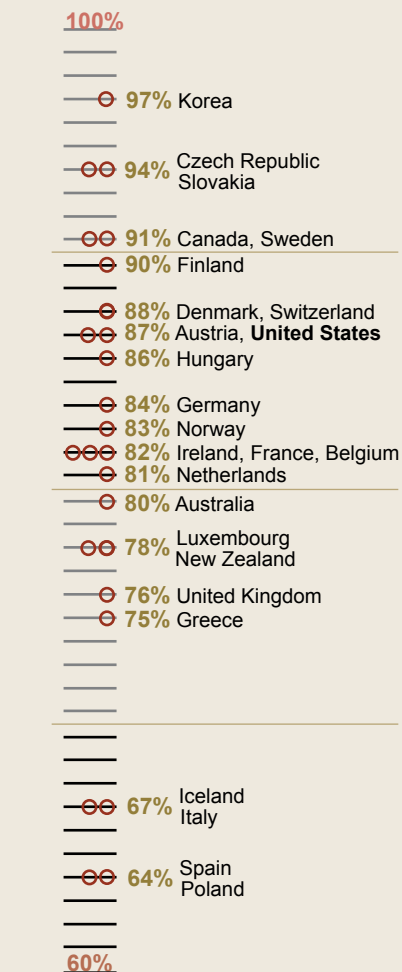
“We cannot allow the shortcomings in the existing system to push us away from external accountability,” Bennet said. “For example, we need to come to understand that the growth models that states like Colorado and that districts like Denver are using to focus more on growth of kids and less on status are very, very important.”

And House Republican Leader John A.

U.S. Ranking Slips

The United States, which once led the world in educational attainment, has been overtaken in recent years, as other countries have stepped up their graduation rates.

Percentage of population that has attained at least a high school education
25- to 34-year-olds (in 2006)



SOURCE: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Boehner of Ohio, a principal author of the current law, said he believes its strict accountability provisions will be preserved with Duncan in the Cabinet. “If Arne is calling the shots on reauthorization of No Child Left Behind,” Boehner said, “I would think that the accountability measures that are in the law would not be weakened.”

ALTERNATIVE METHODS

Duncan’s support among Republicans is largely because of his reputation for supporting programs that boost educational achievement, no matter where on the political spectrum they originated. “The reason Republicans like him so much is he’s not looking at it from a purely

ideological view,” said a senior GOP aide. “He’s looking at it from a much more pragmatic view: How can we get this done?”

And at a House Budget Committee hearing last week, Duncan insisted that he doesn’t look at proposals from a partisan point of view. “I’m the most non-political, non-ideological guy you’d ever meet,” he declared.

The debate over charter schools, which operate under the public system but typically with additional revenue sources and without many of the regulations that apply to traditional schools, has already changed with Duncan at Education and Obama in the White House.

“It is like Nixon going to China,” Alexander said. “It’s one thing for a Republican to advocate charter schools, reward outstanding teaching based upon student achievement and have incentive pay for principals. It’s quite another thing for an Education secretary on behalf of a Democratic president to actually do that.”

Most of the 74 new schools opened in Chicago on Duncan’s watch operate as charter schools, but he also closed three underperforming charter schools — a point he will make as he tries to generate support for more of these institutions.

In last week’s speech on education, his first as president, Obama challenged states to eliminate caps some of them place on the number of charter schools. In his budget, he called for a doubling of federal money for charters, and Congress may condition funding upon a requirement to eliminate caps on charters.

“We don’t cap the number of students each year who take AP classes, and we don’t cap how many kids can attend college,” Duncan said. “Why do we cap those things that are making a difference in students’ lives?”

The NEA’s Van Roekel says he supports limited use of charter schools as a place for innovation and a way to share best practices. But his and Duncan’s visions are likely to diverge when Duncan proposes pumping significant federal resources into charter schools.

At that point, “his biggest obstacle will be the Democrats in Congress,” said Alexander, recalling his being stymied when he ran the department in the early 1990s. “I didn’t get to first base with the Democrats in Congress. The same chairmen haven’t changed their minds a bit.”

But Alexander said Duncan’s record in Chicago — persuading the union and educators to open charter schools while closing bad ones — will prove useful as he navigates on Capitol Hill.

Duncan also wants to change common per-



“My job is to fight for children, to fight for kids. When you do that, tough decisions become pretty clear in your head very quickly.”

— Arne Duncan, secretary of Education

ceptions about what public education entails. He believes schools should operate more like community centers: opening earlier, staying open later and operating on Saturdays and in the summer. In 1996, Duncan and his sister began the Ariel Community Academy, a small public school that John Rogers helped to finance. The school relied on small class sizes and functioned as a community center where kids could be dropped off early and picked up late.

And last year, Duncan got 16,000 Chicago teenagers to voluntarily start their freshman year of high school early to get acclimated and foster relationships with their teachers.

“How do we start to create a set of enrichment activities over the summer that middle-class children routinely have?” Duncan asked. “How do we keep our schools open 10, 12, 14 hours a day for a wide variety of after-school programming, not just for children but for their families? We have to think very, very dif-

ferently about that.”

Obama’s budget calls for investments in after-school programs, and he’s outlined a plan for “promise neighborhoods”: inner city areas modeled on the Harlem Children’s Zone, where early education, health services and after-school programs are provided.

WORKING WITH OBAMA

It’s no coincidence that Obama’s budget proposal and his sweeping education policy speech track so closely with Duncan’s own priorities. The new president’s education agenda was born out of initiatives that he watched Duncan implement in Chicago, and he saw and heard from Duncan firsthand about what was working and what wasn’t. During the presidential campaign, Duncan was consulted on every significant education policy move.

Their relationship goes back almost two decades, to when they met on the basketball court courtesy of Craig Robinson, Michelle Obama’s brother and a friend of Duncan’s since high school. Duncan and Obama share numerous close friends, including John Rogers and his former wife, Desiree Rogers, now the White House social secretary.

Obama appears to derive his trust and confidence in Duncan not only from their longstanding personal connection but from a sense that the two share the same approach to the education debate ahead.

“My job is to fight for children, to fight

for kids,” Duncan said. “When you do that, tough decisions become pretty clear in your head very quickly.”

His challenge in remaking national education policy can be gauged by his track record in Chicago. In 2001 he set out to make one of the worst performing urban school districts into one of the best. And by all accounts he fell short, despite his record as the longest-serving big city school chief in the country. During Duncan’s tenure, high school graduation rates rose about 8 percent. But test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, commonly referred to as the nation’s report card, were mixed. Fourth-graders’ math and reading scores rose slightly, but eighth-graders’ reading scores were stagnant. After almost eight years under Duncan, Chicago’s system remains one of the worst nationwide.

His inability to turn around those schools may be more of an indication of how intractable the problems were in an economically disadvantaged district where 84 percent of the students are eligible for subsidized lunches — and how long it takes to see results — than a reflection of his work. But it nonetheless indicates what lies before him at a national level.

And expectations run nearly as high as the hurdle he faces. Those in Washington’s education establishment — including congressional allies such as Miller and Alexander — pin extraordinarily high hopes on Duncan.

At an appearance this month on the need for better data on school performance, Miller was almost giddy with excitement as he explained why he’s counting on significant education policy changes coming soon. “To watch this secretary speak with this passion and this knowledge — I’ve been here 35 years, and this is about as good as it gets, and as exciting as things could possibly get,” he said. ■

Alan K. Ota contributed to this story.

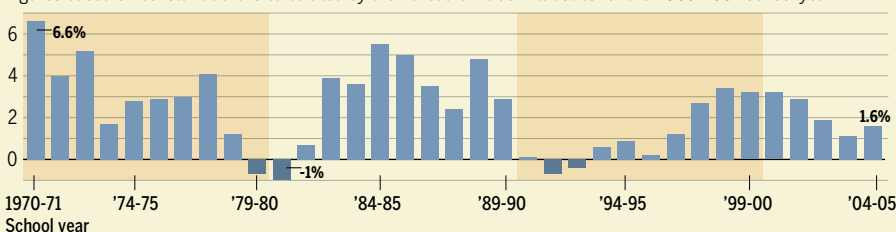
FOR FURTHER READING: *Obama’s fiscal 2010 budget*, CQ Weekly, p. 472; *economic stimulus (PL 111-5)*, p. 352; *performance pay*, p. 174; *Duncan confirmation*, pp. 192, 138; *Head Start overhaul (PL 110-134)*, 2007 *Almanac*, p. 8-6; *No Child law (PL 107-110)*, 2001 *Almanac*, p. 8-3.

Drop-Off in School Spending Growth

Nationwide, spending per pupil by public elementary and secondary schools has grown in most years over the past four decades. But recently, the rate of spending increases has slowed. President Obama’s budget request assumes a rise in federal support for schools, although economic woes may curtail local contributions.

Percent change in per-pupil expenditures for public elementary and secondary schools

Figures based on constant dollars calculated by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the 2006-2007 school year



SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics