

Wall Street Journal

April 22, 2009

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124035679795740971.html>

School Reform Means Doing What's Best for Kids

Let's have an honest assessment of Charter Schools

By ARNE DUNCAN

As states and school districts across America begin drawing down the first \$44 billion in education funds under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, they should bear in mind the core levers of change under the law. In order to drive reform, we will require an honest assessment by states of key issues like teacher quality, student performance, college-readiness and the number of charter schools. We'll also have a strategy to address low-performing schools and provide incentives to compel improvement. When stakeholders -- from parents and business leaders to elected officials -- understand that standards vary dramatically across states and many high-school graduates are unprepared for college or work, they will demand change. In fact, dozens of states are already independently working toward higher standards in education. Union leaders have also signed on.

When parents recognize which schools are failing to educate their children, they will demand more effective options for their kids. They won't care whether they are charters, non-charters or some other model. As President Barack Obama has called for, states should eliminate restrictions that limit the growth of excellent charter schools, move forward in improving or restructuring chronically failing schools, and hold all schools accountable for results.

When educators fully understand which of their colleagues are pulling their weight through a rigorous and fair evaluation system, they will hold each other more accountable. Teachers above all want a professional learning environment that supports them and recognizes and rewards excellence.

When community leaders understand that teacher and principal quality varies dramatically as the best educators gravitate toward higher performing schools, they will push for incentives that bring our most talented educators to schools in need. That requires being open-minded to policies like differential pay.

And when we can link student outcomes to teacher quality and teachers to their colleges of education, we can challenge these institutions to do the best possible job in preparing a new generation of outstanding educators. Without the data, we cannot even have the conversation, let alone discuss solutions.

We need a culture of accountability in America's education system if we want to be the best in the world. No more false choices about money versus reform, or traditional public schools versus charters. No more blaming parents or teachers. We need solid, unimpeachable information that identifies what's working and what's not working in our schools. Our children deserve no less.

The other big lever of change is the incentive funding available through the Recovery Act. The Race to the Top and Innovation What Works funds provide \$5 billion to states, districts and nonprofit groups that most aggressively advance reforms.

Through the guidance we have published on our Web site, we explicitly told governors, state education chiefs, mayors and district superintendents that the application for competitive grants will begin by asking how noncompetitive grant funds are being spent. If they used the funding to invest in more of the same ineffective programs, they will not receive grant money.

Moreover, a significant share of the Recovery Act's State Fiscal Stabilization Fund will be used to hold states and districts accountable for meeting the reform requirements of the law. If they divert money intended for education to noneducational purposes, we may deny future funding or even seek to recover misspent funds.

If, on the other hand, states and districts do the right thing for children by honestly and openly reporting the quality of their standards, assessments, curriculum and teacher quality, they will receive grant money and will be well on their way to an even bigger payoff: better outcomes for students.

There is so much at stake right now. For the first time in decades we have the funding, the committed leadership at the White House and on Capitol Hill, and proven success strategies across the country. We also have national teacher-union leaders more committed to change than ever before, as long as it's done with them rather than to them.

The only open question is whether or not we have the collective political will to face the hard facts about American education. We must close the achievement gap by pursuing what works best for kids, regardless of ideology. In the path to a better education system, that's the only test that really matters.

Mr. Duncan is the U.S. secretary of education.