

Obama taps Duncan for Education chief (the News Journal)

CEO of Chicago Public Schools a 'hands-on' reformer

By JENNIFER PRICE

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In choosing Arne Duncan, CEO of Chicago Public Schools, to be the next U.S. secretary of education, President-elect Barack Obama selected a school reformer and charter school advocate who has a history of rankling parents and teachers unions.

With Vice President-elect Joe Biden at his side, Obama made the announcement in Chicago on Tuesday, standing outside of Dodge Renaissance Academy -- a school Duncan closed in 2002 for low test scores and later reopened with a new staff, an overhauled curriculum and more teacher training. Test scores soon shot up.

As chief executive officer of the country's third-largest school district, the 44-year-old has focused on supporting charter schools, improving struggling schools and closing those that fail -- a policy that sometimes has put him at odds with parents and teachers.

"When it comes to school reform, Arne is the most hands-on of hands-on practitioners," Obama said. "He's not beholden to any one ideology, and he's worked tirelessly to improve teacher quality."

Education reformers in Delaware praised the pick. Paul Herdman -- president of the Rodel Foundation, a Delaware educational nonprofit -- called Duncan a reform-minded superintendent who reflects the bold changes that need to happen in the U.S. education system. Some of Duncan's work in Chicago reflects goals Delaware reformers want instituted here. During the past seven years as head of Chicago's schools, Duncan enacted a performance-based pay plan after gaining support from the teachers union.

A performance-based pay system for teachers is part of Vision 2015 -- a wide-ranging school reform plan that aims to revamp Delaware's school system into a world leader by 2015. The unfunded plan, developed in part by Rodel, suggests reforms such as more academic time, a statewide curriculum, more power and accountability for school principals, data-

driven instruction, a greater investment in preschool education and an education funding system based on student needs.

Duncan "brings a willingness to make the tough choices that are in the best interest of the child," Herdman said.

Biden, whose wife, Jill, was a high school teacher before becoming an English instructor at Delaware Technical & Community College, praised the choice.

"From what I've learned from my wife, when you educate a child, you do a lot more than teach them math, grammar, historical facts. You shine a light. You open doors. You make it possible for dreams to come true. You give a child hope and then nothing is ever the same again for that child.

"And that's what Arne Duncan has done," Biden said. "From the time he got out of school to this very moment, he's shined a light for an awful lot of these kids. He's raised standards. He's helped kids in school. He's expected more. He's changed lives."

A longtime friend to Obama, Duncan advised the president-elect on education issues during the campaign.

Diane Donohue, president of the Delaware State Education Association, the state's largest school employee union, praised Duncan for being committed to increasing funding and flexibility in the federal No Child Left Behind law.

"We all know that NCLB isn't working," she said. "Teaching to the test isn't going to give students the 21st century skills they need to be successful. Those things aren't tested on a standardized test."

Donohue said Duncan is known for listening and cooperating with all stakeholders, including the teachers unions.

The Chicago union has criticized Duncan for his strong advocacy of charter schools, which tens of thousands of Chicago students now attend. While charter schools are publicly funded, they are free of some regulations that govern traditional public schools.

"I don't believe Mr. Duncan's model is a model for America," said Deborah Lynch, a teacher and president of the Chicago Teachers Union from 2001-2004.

Lynch criticized Duncan's advocacy of charter schools, accusing him of dismantling the public school system on which poor children depend.

Donohue said DSEA supports charter schools, but the group sees a need for better oversight of the schools and an increased willingness to bring successful practices taking place in charter schools back to traditional public schools, she said. DSEA leaders also have expressed worries about charter schools taking away money from district schools.

The DSEA has few charter members. District teachers have a choice whether to become paid members of the union, which represents them regardless of membership. Federal law allows local unions to negotiate with their districts for "fair share" provisions whereby a teacher hired by the district who chooses not to join DSEA still must pay the union fee. There is no "fair share" agreement for charter school teachers.

Duncan is also widely viewed as a creative policy-maker.

He backed a proposal in October, for instance, for a high school touted as a haven for gay and bullied youth. Backers later pulled their proposal, saying they wanted to spend another year to finalize their plans.

Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., a NCLB author who serves on the House Education and Labor Committee, said Duncan has a positive reputation for bringing students, parents, teachers, administrators and legislators together to put the needs of students first.

"I am eager to work with the secretary, at this crucial time for our education system, to make necessary updates to No Child Left Behind and focus on children who have been traditionally under-served," Castle said.

Duncan's appointment is subject to Senate confirmation.

Additional Facts

ARNE DUNCAN

AGE; BIRTH DATE: 44; Nov. 6, 1964.

EXPERIENCE: Chief executive officer, Chicago Public Schools, 2001-present; deputy chief of staff, Chicago Public Schools, 2000-2001; director of magnet schools and programs, Chicago Public Schools, 1998-2000; executive director,

Ariel Education Initiative, 1992-1998.

EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree in sociology, Harvard University, 1987.

FAMILY: Married, two children.

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