Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s Senate confirmation hearing in January was thick with encomiums. He was praised by Democrat Tom Harkin of Iowa for the “fresh thinking” he brought to his post as Chicago schools chief for seven years. Republican Lamar Alexander, education secretary under George H. W. Bush, told Duncan he was the best of President Barack Obama’s cabinet appointments. Ailing Massachusetts senator Ted Kennedy, in written comments entered into the record, praised Duncan for having “championed pragmatic solutions to persistent problems” and for lasting longer in Chicago than most urban superintendents.

The warm greetings given by both Republicans and Democrats on the committee reflect Duncan’s reputation as a centrist in the ideologically fraught battles over education reform. He has received national attention for moves favored by reformers, such as opening 75 new schools operated by outside groups and staffed by non-union teachers; introducing a pay-for-performance plan that will eventually be in 40 Chicago schools; and working with organizations, including The New Teacher Project, Teach For America, and New Leaders for New Schools, that recruit talented educators through alternatives to the traditional education-school route.

At the same time, Duncan maintained at least a cordial working relationship with the Chicago Teachers Union, and both the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) backed his nomination. He supported the No Child Left Behind law (NCLB), but also called for dramatic increases in spending to help schools meet the law’s targets, and additional flexibility for districts like his own. In nominating Duncan, Obama said, “We share a deep pragmatism about how to go about this. If pay-for-performance works and we can work with teachers so it doesn’t feel like it’s being imposed upon them…then that’s something that we should explore. If charter schools work, try that.

BY RICHARD LEE COLVIN
You know, let’s not be clouded by ideology when it comes to figuring out what helps our kids.”

Given the strong union support for the Obama presidency, there was great speculation within education circles throughout the fall as to whether the new president would turn out to be a reformer—willing to challenge existing practices and the teachers unions in order to achieve dramatic changes in schools—or play it politically safe by backing programs that brought only marginal changes. A sharp divide among Democrats was in full view at the party’s national convention in Denver, where urban mayors and educators, gathered at a forum sponsored by Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), challenged the dominant role of teachers unions in shaping policy.

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A sharp divide among Democrats was in full view at the party’s national convention in Denver, where urban mayors and educators, gathered at a forum sponsored by Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), challenged the dominant role of teachers unions in shaping policy. Newark mayor Cory Booker told those assembled, “We have to understand that as Democrats we have been wrong on education, and it’s time to get it right.”

Even before the national convention, conflicts between the unions and Democratic reformers were intensifying. At a New York fundraiser in 2007, Obama reportedly made a similar point. According to Joe Williams, DFER’s executive director, Obama incriminated the teachers unions when the director of a Harlem charter school asked the then candidate why Democrats threw up so many obstacles.

Williams explained, “We’re at this point where the nation wants to change education more than the unions and the unions are going to have to decide if they’re going to be part of the change or be left out of it entirely.”

Two manifestoes issued during the Democratic primaries laid out competing philosophies on improving student achievement that were intended to influence the eventual Democratic nominee. A “Broader, Bolder Approach to Education,” a letter issued by the liberal Economic Policy Institute, signed by national leaders across much of the political spectrum, and endorsed by the AFT, argued that improving schools alone would not close achievement gaps between disadvantaged and advantaged students. It called on policymakers to provide preschool, afterschool programs, and summer school, and take steps to improve students’ health and social development. Another letter, issued by a coalition called the Education Equality Project, advocated addressing school system failures through greater accountability, school choice, and changes in compensation that would promote teacher quality.

Those who signed on to the project, a diverse group of leaders in education, philanthropy, and public service, vowed to “challenge politicians, public officials, educators, union leaders and anybody else who stands in the way of necessary change.”

Obama has allies in both camps. Arne Duncan was one of only a handful who signed both statements. Yet in his confirmation hearing, Duncan left little doubt that the administration wants to make systemic changes. “We must do dramatically better,” Duncan told the Senate committee. “We must continue to innovate. We must build
upon what works. We must stop doing what doesn’t work. And we have to continue to challenge the status quo.”

Advisors to Obama say the rhetorical distinction was overdrawn and that the thrust of the president’s strategy is to make progress without causing further polarization. His education platform reflected that approach. Like many Democrats, he wants to spend more money: on helping students attend college; early childhood care and education; and improving teaching through mentoring and professional development for both principals and teachers. He has criticized NCLB for encouraging teaching solely focused on preparing students to pass tests. But in line with many Republicans and more conservative Democrats, Obama, like Duncan, supports school choice, charter schools, performance-based pay, and alternatives to education schools for teacher preparation (see sidebar). He and his opponent, Senator John McCain, both praised the work of Washington, D.C., schools chancellor Michelle Rhee, who has fought the local union as well as the AFT over tenure and teacher pay.

Economic Stimulus
Widespread agreement that only a massive stimulus package could rescue the U.S. economy presented the new administration with the opportunity to placate both sides of the Democratic divide. The unions and their allies would get a massive infusion of federal funds into the schools that would help offset state and local budget cuts. And this would give Obama cover to push for tougher reforms down the road.

House Democrats, after negotiations with Obama’s team, in mid-January proposed a stimulus package of $825 billion that included between $120 billion and $140 billion for public schools and colleges. Most of the money would have few strings attached.

The spending package would boost federal spending on Title I programs for low-income students and for special education, distributing the money according to current formulas. It would also provide at least $39 billion to offset state cuts in education budgets and $20 billion for capital improvements at schools and colleges. About $15 billion would be available to states as bonuses for efforts such as ensuring that low-performing schools and districts have effective teachers and that the performance of English-language learners and special education students is properly assessed (see Figure 1). One Obama aide said similar incentives would be incorporated into education programs to be introduced later in the spring.

The stimulus package also proposed to boost funding for the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF), a Bush-era program that provides financial incentives to teachers and principals who raise overall student achievement and close achievement gaps. After Democrats took control of Congress in 2006, they zeroed out funding for TIF but restored $100 million for the following year.

Clues from the Campaign
Throughout his campaign for the presidency, Barack Obama expressed support for higher teacher pay in exchange for greater accountability for teacher performance.

August 19, 2007, Democratic primary debate on This Week
“Every teacher I think wants to succeed. And if we give them a pathway to professional development, where we’re creating master teachers, they are helping with apprenticeships for young new teachers, they are involved in a variety of other activities that are really adding value to the schools, then we should be able to give them more money for it. But we should only do it if the teachers themselves have some buy-in in terms of how they’re measured. They can’t be judged simply on standardized tests that don’t take into account whether children are prepared before they get to school or not.”

April 27, 2008, Fox News interview:
As president, can you name a hot-button issue where you would be willing to buck the Democratic Party line and say, You know what? Republicans have a better idea here?
“I think that on issues of education, I’ve been very clear about the fact—and sometimes I’ve gotten in trouble with the teachers union on this—that we should be experimenting with charter schools. We should be experimenting with different ways of compensating teachers.”

August 27, 2008, Democratic National Convention:
“Michelle and I are here only because we were given a chance at an education. I will not settle for an America where some kids don’t have that chance. I’ll invest in early childhood education. I’ll recruit an army of new teachers, pay them higher salaries and give them more support. In exchange, I’ll ask for higher standards and more accountability.”

In his last budget, Bush requested $200 million for the program, the same amount Obama’s team has proposed.

Thirty-six states plus the District of Columbia already have local or statewide teacher compensation systems that add some sort of financial incentive to the standard step-and-column pay plan, according to the NEA. Former NEA president Reg Weaver cautioned that “while we can be open to alternatives, we should always oppose politically motivated, quick fixes designed to
weaken the voice of teachers and the effectiveness of education employees. If they want to talk about changing the way we’re paid, they need to do that with us, not to us.”

In Obama’s platform, he agreed that such plans should be developed in consultation with teachers. Among the promising models is a voluntary pay-for-performance program in place in districts in a dozen states, funded in part by TIF, and implemented by Duncan in Chicago. The Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) provides teachers with professional support, helps them to use data in instruction, holds them accountable for results, and provides bonuses. Teachers in 10 Chicago schools voted to participate in TAP starting in the fall of 2007, and bonuses totaling $340,000 were given out the following year for improved test scores at 9 of the schools. “This is a landmark event for Chicago’s schools—recognizing and rewarding educators for exemplary work and compensating them accordingly,” Duncan said at the time.

The scale of the proposed spending on education is stunning, more than doubling the federal contribution. Of course, even an increase of that magnitude would leave the feds as the junior investors in public education, their contribution dwarfed by current state and local spending. But the funds proposed to offset cuts in state funding would mean that, for the first time, the federal government would be directly covering the cost of basic school operations. That kind of money could buy a lot of goodwill, especially if it helps states avoid laying off thousands of teachers. By December 2008, 19 states had cut K–12 education spending, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal research group. Even with the infusion of federal support proposed so far, states may have to make further cuts in their education budgets if the economy does not improve quickly. States spend between one-third and one-half of their budgets on elementary and secondary education, and the revenue available to state and local governments

Extra Help for Schools (Figure 1)

The $825 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act proposed by House Democrats in January would provide at least $80 billion and possibly as much as $120 billion in new funding to Department of Education programs for elementary and secondary school students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program or Purpose</th>
<th>Billions of Dollars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Fiscal Stabilization Fund, to provide fiscal relief to the states over two years</td>
<td>79.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For local school districts and public colleges and universities distributed through existing state and federal formulas</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonus grants to states for meeting key education performance measures</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For other high-priority needs such as public safety, may include education</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School modernization, to be distributed according to states’ 2008 Title I allocations</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title I School Improvement Grants to states and high-need school districts</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State grants for special education</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing Education through Technology</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infants and Families program, to make early intervention services available for young children with disabilities</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For enhancement of states’ longitudinal data systems</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Incentive Fund (supports performance-based pay)</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School modernization efforts at Impact Aid schools</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education for Homeless Children and Youth</td>
<td>0.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit Enhancement for Charter School Facilities</td>
<td>0.025</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations web site
is shrinking fast. By January 2008, states had reported deficits of $350 billion. “If the economy doesn’t get better, schools are in trouble,” said Jack Jennings, founder and CEO of the Center on Education Policy. “For the sake of the schools it’s important that Obama pay attention to the economy.”

Even if the economy recovers and the stimulus package goes through intact, some observers question whether the proposed spending will do enough to address persistent disparities in achievement. Despite past federal support directed toward the needs of low-income students, African American 4th and 8th graders did not make measurable progress on the National Assessment of Educational Progress between 2005 and 2007. “Is the stimulus going to benefit kids in ways that are palpable and real and that improve achievement?” asked Dianne Piche of the Citizens Commission on Civil Rights. As the House was passing its version of the stimulus package (see Figure 1), Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute noted that most of the money simply gave states dollars to keep intact the programs of the past: “It’s like an alcoholic at the end of the night when the bars close and the solution is to open the bar for another hour,” he told a New York Times reporter.

No Child Left Behind
The pressing economic issues, as well as difficult politics, will likely push reauthorization of NCLB into 2010 or even 2011. California Democrat Representative George Miller, who was one of four members of Congress who worked with the first Bush administration on the original NCLB, wants to see it revised and reauthorized. Yet Miller acknowledged to the Washington Post that “at the end of the day, it may be the most taint brand in America.”

NCLB has been a great success in the sense that no one disagrees with its goals: accountability for results, addressing issues of teacher quality, putting a spotlight on the learning of all students, and better targeting of funds to districts serving the most disadvantaged students. Still, its detractors argue that the law has had unfortunate side effects: too much time spent teaching to narrow tests, schools focused on boosting the scores of students who are just below the proficiency threshold, and some states lowering their standards to reduce the number of schools missing their achievement targets.

“We’ve learned over the past five to 10 years that we have to align curriculum, align standards, and align tests with professional development,” Jennings said. “We’ve also learned that it is very, very hard to do. We’ve also learned that if we really set certain goals…teachers will pay attention to those students who are just below the goal and not pay attention to those who are further down or further up.”

Obama spoke during his campaign at length about the ins and outs of testing and decried teaching to the test. Rather than abandon the testing in NCLB, he has said he wants to invest in improving assessments, so that they measure a broader range of skills than just the basics.

Perhaps the best hope for those who support the law’s strict accountability provisions is that the goodwill built up through the stimulus plan could convince education groups to support any NCLB proposal made by Obama.
The 2007 reauthorization effort nearly succeeded. But it blew up because the negotiators could not reach agreement on how schools should be measured. The NEA, in particular, wanted to place more weight on such inputs as school atmosphere and other qualitative measures and less on test scores. “That was a nonstarter for lots of people,” says Piche, who testified before Congress during the reauthorization hearings.

“We were very, very close on actual language...even on multiple measures, and how you would improve assessments, but ultimately there were sticking points that haven’t gone away,” Piche said. “I think [the NEA] hoped that with a Democratic majority in the House there would be a significant loosening of the Adequate Yearly Progress provisions [which identify schools as failing if they aren’t on pace to full proficiency by 2014] and changes in assessments.”

The Obama administration is expected to be willing to add a few criteria for judging schools beyond test scores. But the use of test scores, disaggregated to show student achievement by ethnicity and socioeconomic status, is certain to remain.

Reauthorizing the law in 2010 may be even more difficult than in 2007. Many freshman Democrats in the House who were elected in 2008, as well as many who came to Washington in 2006, pledged to repeal NCLB. Few of the Republicans left in Congress are moderates, meaning those who remain would like to reduce the role of the federal government in public education. Depending on what happens with the law over the next two years, more opponents of NCLB could be elected to Congress in 2010. By then, so many schools may be considered in need of improvement—even with the lax standards set by many states—that the law may appear irrational and unworkable. Perhaps the best hope for those who support the law’s strict accountability provisions is that the goodwill built up through the stimulus plan could convince education groups to support any NCLB proposal made by Obama, even if it looks a lot like the one that went down in flames in 2007.

In the interim, the law could be weakened or strengthened through the regulatory process. Piche says the administration should invest in better assessments, especially for English-language learners and students receiving special education services.

President Obama has proposed to help states develop more rigorous standards. “Democrats,” he said in a speech last September 2007 in Dayton, Ohio, “have to realize that...being against No Child Left Behind is not an education policy.”

Hope for Reform

Despite the challenges, many in Washington are hopeful that public schools may in fact improve under an Obama administration. Although he cannot ignore the unions that form a key part of the party’s constituency, Obama owes less to them than did past Democratic presidents. The unions did not support him in the primaries and, because he raised so much money on his
The unions did not support him in the primaries and, because he raised so much money on his own, Obama was not as dependent on their money as others have been.

President-elect Obama’s personal commitment to improving education, creates a real opportunity to bring about systemic, long-lasting change. Everyone says they support the goals of NCLB and if that’s real, then he can use his bully pulpit to say that we’ll do in education the equivalent of saying we’ll put a man on the moon in 10 years.

He can say that we will make sure that every kid who starts the race will cross the finish line and it will give everyone goose bumps and start a new type of discussion about what the game is. But it only has the potential to change the game if he treats it as an opportunity to wipe the slate clean and inspire people to think very big about what is possible,” adds Williams.

“Obama is the only person I’ve seen in the last 20 years who may be up to that job.”

His vision of education is as a foundation not just of the economy but of a society in which people take care of each other,” explained Stanford University education professor Linda Darling-Hammond, who advised Obama during the campaign and handled education policy for the president-elect’s transition team, in remarks delivered in November 2007 at a National Academy of Education event. “I think we can make great strides in a very short time.”

Although some may worry about the cost of all of the new programs, Darling-Hammond views the amount Obama wants to spend on education as a relatively small part of the overall bailout and recovery package, which could exceed $1.5 trillion.

In his speech last September in Dayton, Obama assured his audience, “We can do it all.”

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