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Key Questions for Arne Duncan, Nominee for Secretary for U.S. Department of Education

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The U.S. Senate will soon render its advice and consent to the nomination of Chicago Public Schools Chief Arne Duncan to be secretary of education.

The word *education* is not mentioned in the Constitution, and the federal government has historically played a limited role in funding and regulating public education across the country. The federal government currently provides only 9 percent of the funding for K-12 public education in America.¹

But federal spending is at an all-time high. The federal government currently spends \$71 billion annually on K-12 education programs. Through programs like No Child Left Behind, which has seen funding increases of more than 40 percent during the Bush Administration, the federal government now exerts greater authority over public schools across the nation.²

Unfortunately, more than 40 years of increasing federal involvement in education has yielded little progress in improved student learning. Historical measures of students' academic achievement, such as the long-term National Assessment of Educational Progress, have remained relatively flat even as federal spending per-pupil has nearly tripled since the 1970s.³ Millions of children continue to pass through the nation's public schools without receiving a quality education. In many of our nation's largest cities—including Mr. Duncan's Chicago school district—barely half of all children graduate high school.⁴

History has shown the limits of what the federal government can and should do to improve education. But the new Administration has a historic opportunity to transform the federal role in education and, in the process, support reform at the state and local level to ensure that all children have an opportunity to receive a quality education.

To evaluate whether Secretary-designate Duncan will support this transformation, Senators should keep the following question in mind as they consider his confirmation:

Question 1: The Appropriate Federal Response to State Budget Challenges. The federal government is now being called upon to deliver a massive “bailout” for states, localities, and school districts facing budget shortfalls due to the current economic climate. Six governors, for example, recently called on the federal government to provide a \$250 billion “rescue package” for education. President-elect Obama has called for funds for education to be included in his proposed emergency spending package. *Do you support a sharp increase in federal spending on education and a federal “bailout” of state and local governments?*

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Answer: A federal bailout package for public school systems is unnecessary for a number of reasons. First, states' current budget shortfalls follow decades of state government spending increases well ahead of inflation. Second, all levels of government spending on public education have risen dramatically in recent years. The average per-pupil expenditure in American public schools has increased by 49 percent over the past 20 years after adjusting for inflation.⁵ Importantly, consistent increases in federal and state spending have failed to improve educational performance. Third, a federal bailout of state and local governments would only shift the burden to federal taxpayers.

A responsible alternative to a federal bailout would be to grant states emergency regulatory relief and greater flexibility in the use of funding provided through major federal education programs like No Child Left Behind. This flexibility would relieve states of the expensive burden of complying with federal programs requirements and regulations and allow states to prioritize funding and allocate resources to the most pressing needs.

Question 2: Reforming, Not Expanding, the Federal Role in Education. Since the 1960s, the federal government's approach to education has been to increase federal funding and to create new federal programs. This strategy has failed to yield significant improvement as judged by long-term measures of students' academic achievement. In previous congressional testimony, you have called for reforming No Child Left Behind to grant state

and local school leaders greater freedom and flexibility to innovate and implement reforms that best meet students' needs.⁶ On the other hand, you have called for a doubling in federal spending on No Child Left Behind. *Do you support reforming, not expanding, the federal role in education?*

Answer: The right answer is yes. The strategy of increasing federal funding and creating new programs has failed to solve the problems in the nation's public schools. Major federal education programs like No Child Left Behind should be reformed to give states greater autonomy to end ineffective programs and reallocate resources for state priorities while maintaining academic accountability and transparency. This approach would allow state policymakers—with greater input from parents and other stakeholders—to take responsibility for strengthening public education in local communities.

Question 3: Cutting Waste from the Department of Education's Budget. During the campaign, President-elect Obama called for a review of federal programs and the elimination of wasteful and ineffective programs. The Department of Education's budget includes dozens of programs that have proven to be ineffective, duplicative, or unnecessary. *Do you support reviewing the Education Department budget and terminating unnecessary programs?*

Answer: The federal government's Program Assessment Rating Tool recently identified 47 programs in the Department of Education's budget that were ineffective, unnecessary, or duplicative.⁷ The

1. National Center for Education Statistics, "Digest of Education Statistics 2007," Table 162, at http://www.nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07_162.asp?referrer=list (January 9, 2009).
2. U.S. Department of Education, "Summary of Discretionary Funds, FY 2009 Request," at <http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget09/summary/appendix1.pdf> (January 9, 2009).
3. See Dan Lips, Shanea Watkins, and John Fleming, "Does Spending More on Education Improve Academic Achievement?," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2179, September 8, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/bg2179.cfm> (January 9, 2009).
4. Christopher B. Swanson, Ph.D., "Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytic Report on High School Graduation," Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, April 1, 2008.
5. Lips, Watkins, Fleming, "Does Spending More on Education Improve Academic Achievement?"
6. Arne Duncan, "Statement before the House Education and Labor Committee, Subcommittee on Education Reform," August 28, 2006.
7. U.S. Department of Education, *Fiscal Year 2009 Budget Summary—February 4, 2008*, section III, at <http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget09/summary/edlite-section3.html> (December 3, 2008).

projected budget savings from terminating these programs is approximately \$3.3 billion. Moreover, the Office of Management and Budget reports that the 2008 Department of Education budget included 758 congressional earmarks totaling \$327 million in appropriations.⁸ The new Administration should support terminating these programs and only approve a budget for the Department of Education that does not include congressional earmarks.

Question 4: Reforming Federal Early Childhood Education Programs. President-elect Obama has called for a new federal program and a significant funding increase for early childhood education. However, the Government Accountability Office reported in 2005 that there were 69 federal programs providing early childhood education and care.⁹ The largest of these programs is Head Start, which was funded at \$6.9 billion in 2008 with a cost per child served of approximately \$7,500.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the nearly \$100 billion in taxpayer money used to fund the Head Start programs has had limited impact and has not delivered on the promise of significantly improving school readiness for disadvantaged children. *Considering this track record, do you support creating a new federal preschool program?*

Answer: The right answer is no. Rather than creating new federal programs, policymakers should reform early childhood education programs like Head Start. For example, Head Start should be reformed to grant state policymakers greater flexibility to integrate it with other state early childhood education programs and develop new strategies to improve education and care for young children. In addition, Head Start should be reformed to also allow states to give families the ability to select an early childhood provider of choice.

Question 5: Supporting Parental Choice in Education. Like President-elect Obama, you had the opportunity to attend a private school, the University of Chicago Laboratory School, as a young

student. Like Obama, this educational opportunity clearly prepared you to succeed academically and professionally. Across the nation, a policy debate continues over whether families should be given the ability to use their child's share of public education funding to pick a school of choice, be it a public, private, or charter school. *As education secretary, would you support the principle that parents should be given the power to choose the right school for their children?*

Answer: The new secretary should join the growing numbers of bipartisan supporters of school choice policies. Policies that give parents the power to choose the best school for their children have been shown to increase family satisfaction and involvement, improve learning among participating students, and encourage healthy competition and innovation in school systems.

Recognizing the federal government's limited authority in education, the new Administration has the opportunity to encourage greater parental choice in education in the following ways: First, federal programs like No Child Left Behind and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act should be reformed to grant state policymakers the opportunity to use federal funds to give parents the ability to choose their children's school. Second, the federal government should maintain and expand the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program to give more children in the nation's capital, where the federal government has oversight authority, the power to attend a school of their parents' choice. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the leaders of the new Administration should use the bully pulpit to urge lawmakers across the country to join the growing bipartisan support for school choice.

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8. Office of Management and Budget, "List of Bureaus for the Department of Education," at [http://earmarks.omb.gov/2008-appropriations-by-agency/agency_title/\[018\]_summary.html](http://earmarks.omb.gov/2008-appropriations-by-agency/agency_title/[018]_summary.html) (December 3, 2008).

9. U.S. Government Accountability Office, "GAO Update on the Number of Prekindergarten Care and Education Programs," letter to Senators Enzi, Alexander, and Voinovich.

10. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, "Head Start Program Fact Sheet: 2007 Fiscal Year," at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/about/fy2008.html> (January 9, 2009).

For More Information

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Dan Lips, "A Nation Still at Risk: The Case for Federalism and School Choice," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2125, April 21, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/bg2125.cfm>.

Dan Lips, "Reforming No Child Left Behind by Allowing States to Opt-Out: An A-PLUS for Federalism," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2044, June 19, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/bg2044.cfm>.