

WASHINGTON COMMENTARY

Inheriting the Education Wars

BY ANNE C. LEWIS

The media have been portraying Chicago Supt. Arne Duncan as some sort of a peacemaker, able to negotiate his way through the warring tents pitched outside the offices of the U.S. Department of Education. At least, that's the way his nomination as Secretary of Education is being spun. However, he is neither the worst fear nor the best hope for innumerable education groups.

Thanks to the policy controversies of the last eight years, most of the competing tents have different occupants this time around. Those older voices are still clamoring for attention, but this time they're almost drowned out by competing policy proponents.

Over several months — and many published position papers — the Democrats have divided into two opposing camps. On one hand, there's the Broader, Bolder Bunch who want to keep reforms but support them with stronger out-of-school services for children and youth. They want research-based practices that develop such skills as critical thinking and teamwork, which are increasingly valued in society and the workplace.

On the other side are the Hold-to-It Hawks who want to continue strict accountability measures on schools without regard to out-of-school factors, use charter schools to break up the establishment, and focus on teacher quality by designing different compensation plans. Aligned with this group are many civil rights leaders who fear that relieving pressure on schools will lead to low-performing students.

The conservative-leaning Thomas B. Fordham Institute, always the “gadfly” in policy debates because it puts out its own definitions of whatever issue is on the table, describes the policy factions this way:

- The System Defenders: They believe public education is basically okay, just needs more resources.

- The Army of the Potomac: They have generally sound instincts about reform but too much faith that Washington can make significant changes.
- The Local Controllers: They want the feds to “butt out” of K-12 education but to keep sending money anyway.

The institute, of course, has its own “small but feisty band,” known for its Reform Realism. This group would counter much of NCLB as written and, instead, provide flexible dollars for disadvantaged students, with results very public; foster common standards and tests driven by consensus among governors' offices; and pursue other targeted and noncontroversial policies. The feds, says the institute, led by Chester Finn, Jr., should get out of the business of

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overseeing state testing and reporting systems, mandating school sanctions, and generating specifics about teacher credentials.

This is a quick view of the policy field through which Duncan will need to navigate before he gets around to reauthorizing NCLB. That won't be its name next time around; maybe it will even revert to its original title, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Nor will reauthorization be the first issue on the Administration's agenda, but the momentum to renew it will grow over the year.

When Duncan and his crew take it up, the biggest issue is going to be accountability, or how to get out of the mess that federal policy created. Already, two camps are emerging.

The Hold-to-It folks want to continue test-based reforms, albeit with better tests and more aligned policies. Recent reports from Achieve, Inc. and the Education Trust were directed at state policies and made some assumptions about testing's role that seem overblown. They contend, for example, that colleges and employers will want to use high school exit or end-of-course results, but that is not confirmed by other reports that found no interest in or plans to use such results. If the feds go along with the proposals of these groups — more than 30 states are participating in

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WASHINGTON COMMENTARY

Achieve's work on high school assessments — schools and students may be stuck with old-style measures for a long time.

The Bolder Folks, on the other hand, are coalescing around efforts to define and assess 21st-century skills. Everyone wants kids to master basic skills, but more and more voices favor also giving merit to critical thinking, teamwork, and using knowledge in different contexts.

The Bolder people have their reports, too, and I'd bet their ideas would be more exciting and motivating to teachers, administrators, and parents than those fostered by the other side. *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right* by Richard Rothstein (Economic Policy Institute and Teachers College Press), for example, favors a broad and robust accountability system that mixes an expanded National Assessment of Educational Progress with limited state assessments, periodic school inspections as in England, and a reliance on school-

based evidence to evaluate school progress, such as formative assessments and sharing of student work.

Another report, this one by Elena Silva of Education Sector, argues that 21st-century skills, such as thinking creatively and analyzing information, can be measured accurately (*Measuring Skills for the 21st Century*). She describes emerging assessment models for such skills that can be incorporated in assessments focused on basic skills or core content. Even Achieve acknowledges that some states are dissatisfied with traditional testing and are instituting performance assessments, including Rhode Island and Ohio.

Perhaps Duncan will want to let states solve these controversies. In Chicago, his reputation for change was based more on incremental steps than large-scale reforms. However, Duncan is known to have been dissatisfied with the constraints of Adequate Yearly Progress accountability and frustrated at not getting approval for a different system for Chicago. He now has a chance to encourage the whole country to ambitiously change how we use accountability. **■**

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