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The Apostle of Reform

By Richard Stengel

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, 44, will have more money to spend than any other Education Secretary in U.S. history — and with that \$100 billion comes the chance to reshape public education in America for decades. He recently sat down with TIME managing editor Richard Stengel.

Should students be going to school longer?

I think the school day is too short, the school week is too short. And I worry particularly about poor children — children who don't have two parents at home, children who don't have better results. The common denominator of all of them is they're better off in school after school, doing more on Saturdays, doing more over the summer. The other big issue is that ultimately if we don't do it, we're at a competitive disadvantage. Kids in India, China are going to school 25% to 30% more than students here. ([See pictures of](#))

We don't necessarily agree. We say the issue is more process and quality than time consumed.

Where do you see the charter-school movement going?

I'm a big fan of choice and competition, and in our country, historically, wealthy families have had a lot of options as to where to send their children. And families that didn't come from a lot of money had one option — and usually that option wasn't a good one. The more options available, the more we give parents a chance to figure out what the best learning environment is for their child. To me it's not about letting a thousand flowers bloom. You need to have a really high bar about whom you let open the charter school. [You need] a really rigorous front-end competitive process. If not, you just get mediocrity. Once you let them in, you need to have two things. You need to give those charter operators great autonomy — to really free them from the education bureaucracy. You have to couple that with very strong accountability.

Is part of your plan to reinflate No Child Left Behind?

It was dramatically underfunded. And again, we're taking that [problem] off the table. While it's never enough money, historic levels of resources are going into education. What I think No Child Left Behind got right was, it forever put a spotlight on the difference of achievement between white kids and children of color — African-American and Latino. Forevermore, our country can't sweep that under the rug. Those conversations are tough and hard, but they are real. What NCLB did was, they were very loose on the goals — 50 states could create their own goals and 50 different goalposts, and [what] that led to was a real dumbing down of those goals. What they're very tight on is how you get there. I think what we need to do is fundamentally reverse that — I think we need to be really tight on goals and have these common college-ready international benchmark standards that we're all aiming for, but then be much looser in how you let folks get there.

Regular folks don't get the distinction between certified teachers and qualified teachers — why the teachers' union wouldn't let Einstein teach physics to high school students because he wasn't certified.

Isn't all that matters that our children learn? That teachers give students knowledge? And not how they became a teacher, whether it's from a traditional route or an alternative certification route. At the end of the day, it is not about a piece of paper coming [through] the door. It's about student achievement.

I think parents look at tenured teachers and say, I don't have tenure in my job — why should teachers have tenure?

What you need is a really clear bar as to what it takes to achieve [tenure]. And what it should be is not automatic. It shouldn't be one year, two years and you need to have a great job in increasing student achievement?

We don't believe in tenure.

Is there an opportunity now, with the economy changing so radically, to get the best and brightest to go into teaching?

It's a historic opportunity. One of the only benefits of a horrendous economy is teaching becomes a much more attractive profession. Second, you have the President, the First Lady, the Vice President, the Vice President's wife — who still teaches today, which is amazing — talking about serving your country, [saying] here is what you need to do. The final thing is, over the next several years we could lose, due to retirement, as many as a million teachers. Our ability to attract or retain good teachers over the next four, five, six years is going to shape public education in our country for the next 25 to 30 years. You're going to have hundreds of thousands of jobs every year.

There's been a lot in the press about, Well, the President should focus on the economy, the economy, the economy, and the other things that he's putting on the front burner, like health care or education, should be on the back.

This is where, I think, the President's instincts are absolutely right, that the way we're going to create a great economy and a strong country and a vibrant

democracy is by better educating all of our children. And this is a cliché, but if you think education is expensive, try ignorance. □

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