



# 2009-Administration Overview Background

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## *The Obama Administration*

While it is still early, and few high-level appointments below the level of Secretary of Education have been made, it is clear that education is a top priority for the Obama Administration. Education funding is a major component of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Nationwide, the Act appropriated nearly \$82 billion for pre-K-12 education, of which \$8 billion will go to California. While the funds are intended to restore state-level funding cuts, the Administration has also made it clear that it wants the funding used for reforms, particularly in the areas of closing the achievement gap and achieving a more equitable distribution of experienced teachers among schools.

This dual purpose of the ARRA funds—to restore cuts and promote reform—was reiterated by Secretary Arne Duncan in a speech at the National School Boards Association’s annual conference in San Diego, April 4. In that speech, Secretary Duncan said that federal funding would be used to save “hundreds of thousands” of teachers’ jobs, but, at the same time, it is not enough to preserve the status quo. He wants to transform the U. S. Department of Education into an “engine of innovation,” to capitalize on proven strategies and create “systems of excellence” out of “pockets of excellence.”

A key element of this plan is to use comprehensive data systems to track student performance back to teachers and track teacher performance back to schools. This information would be used to reward the “best and brightest” teachers as well as to improve teacher training.

President Obama has also laid out an agenda that goes beyond the immediate concerns of the ARRA. In a speech to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in March, he proposed five “pillars of reform:”

- Investing in early childhood initiatives, such as Head Start
- Encouraging better standards and assessments by focusing on testing itineraries that better fit our kids and the world in which they live
- Recruiting, preparing and rewarding outstanding teachers by giving incentives for a new generation of teachers and for new levels of excellence from all of our teachers
- Promoting innovation and excellence in America’s schools by supporting charter schools, reforming the school calendar and the structure of the school day
- Providing every American with a quality higher education, whether it’s college or technical training.

The President’s remarks made no reference to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. When asked if he would push for reauthorization of NCLB—otherwise known as the Elementary and

Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, told the *U. S. News & World Report* that “he first wants to go on a cross-country listening tour and that he hopes that Congress will reauthorize a new version of the law late in the year.” Secretary Duncan also said that he wants to make the law less punitive.

While he is concerned about overtesting, he thinks the problem could be solved by developing “better” tests that are based on academic standards that are more rigorous and aligned with those of other leading nations. The idea of using international tests to provide the benchmarks for U. S. schools is gaining traction in Washington, with strong support from groups such as the National Governor’s Association and the Alliance for Excellent Education.

In fact, international benchmarking is the first of four conditions that states must commit to in accepting ARRA funds, according to an op-ed piece authored by Secretary Duncan in the *Dallas Morning News* on March 28, 2009. The four are:

- Adopt internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that better prepare students for college and a career
- Build high-quality data systems that track a student’s academic career, making it possible to tell which teachers, programs and schools are effective
- Recruit more high-quality educators to underperforming schools as well as to subjects like math and science
- Support effective strategies to turn around underperforming schools.

One of the “effective strategies” included in the last point is school closure. Secretary Duncan added that “closing failing schools and replacing staff is tough medicine, but the alternative is unacceptable.”

Prior to his appointment as Secretary of Education, Arnie Duncan was the CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, where by the fall of 2008 he closed 51 schools and opened 82 new schools (56 of which are charter) under a program called Renaissance 2010 (Ren2010). Ren2010 was announced by Mayor Daley in 2004 in a speech to the Commercial Club of Chicago, an organization of the city’s business elite. The venue is important to note, because the plan for Ren2010 was developed by New Schools for Chicago, an offshoot of the Commercial Club. New Schools for Chicago selects, evaluates and distributes Commercial Club funds to the Ren2010 schools.

According to Pauline Lipman (University of Illinois-Chicago) and David Hursh (University of Rochester), “Renaissance 2010 is part of a larger project to raze low-income African American communities, with the goal of gentrifying areas with new condominiums, luxury apartments, and retail services.” They cite statistics showing that nearly all of the schools that have been closed by Ren2010 were in African American communities experiencing gentrification. The reopened schools contain substantially changed student populations.

One such area is Midsouth, where public housing is being replaced with condominiums and \$500,000 homes. The transformation of the public schools in the area is an important step to recruit middle class home buyers. Currently, over 90 percent of the students who attend Midsouth schools are from low-income African American families. The plan calls for the creation of “mixed income” schools that would serve one-third middle income, one-third moderate income, and one-third low income students. Accordingly, nearly two-thirds of the

schools' current students would be sent to other schools in the city. As a result of prior closures, some students have been transferred to as many as four different schools in three years. Some neighborhoods have been left with no schools at all.

Most of the new schools are privately-run charters that receive additional public and private funding. Some citizens groups have contended that public funds for repairs and new construction are not allocated on the basis of need, but rather directed to the Ren2010 schools, most of which are charters. As a result, those schools that still serve largely African American populations continue to be neglected. In response, legislation is currently pending in the Illinois state legislature to put a moratorium on school closings and develop guidelines for the allocation of facilities dollars (HB 363, Cynthia Soto).

The school board in Chicago is appointed by the mayor and is comprised exclusively of representatives from the upper tier of the city's civic, commercial, and business communities. The mayor also appoints the school district's CEO. The changes that led to the mayor-appointed school board also included the elimination of locally-elected Local School Councils.

This structure, which also has the political and financial support of the Commercial Club, has led to a top-down style of decision making which is both reviled by critics and lauded by supporters. Mr. Duncan has said that he could never have accomplished the things he did if he had to answer to an elected school board.

Meanwhile, community and parent groups are feeling increasingly disenfranchised and cynical about the real purpose of school reform. One parent told Lipman and Hursh, "They're pushing us out of the community under the guise of school reform." Lacking access to school board meetings or other levels of the decision making hierarchy, parents and community activists have begun picketing and boycotting businesses that contribute to Ren2010 through the Commercial Club.

Meanwhile, Representative Soto's bill now has 21 co-sponsors and passed its first committee. In addition to imposing a moratorium, the bill would create a new two-house subcommittee with the specific purpose of reviewing and analyzing facilities spending in the Chicago Public Schools. The subcommittee would be required to "consult widely with stakeholders about these facility issues."

As CEO, Mr. Duncan was able to impose changes to the Chicago Public Schools without consulting widely with stakeholders. As Secretary of Education, he has none of the "command and control" authority he had in Chicago. However, he is able (and apparently willing) to use his control of the allocation of significant amounts of federal funding to influence decision making at the state and local levels. It remains to be seen whether he will also adopt the more collaborative style of decision making that he rejected in Chicago.

Additional Information:

[http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/fy2010\\_new\\_era/Jumpstarting\\_The\\_Economy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/fy2010_new_era/Jumpstarting_The_Economy.pdf)  
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