

**Testimony of Education Secretary-designate Arne Duncan
before the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
United States Senate
January 13, 2009**

Mr. Chairman, Senator Enzi, and members of the Committee:

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to appear before you today as President-elect Obama's nominee for Secretary of Education. I am humbled by the collective wisdom, insight and experience of this Committee and the full Congress, and by the vision and purpose of the new administration. Above all, I am honored and inspired by the call to serve America on an issue that is so important to our future.

I am joined here today by my wife, Karen, and my children, Claire and Ryan – so you can see that my interest in this issue is more than professional.

In today's era of global economics, rapid technological change and extreme economic disparity, education is the most pressing issue facing America. Preparing young people for success in life is not just a moral obligation of society. It's an economic imperative. As President-elect Obama has said many times, "The nations that out-teach us today will outcompete us tomorrow."

Education is also the civil rights issue of our generation – the only sure path out of poverty and the only way to achieve a more equal and just society. In a world where economic success is tied more closely than ever to educational opportunity, we are condemning millions of children to be less than they could be by consigning them to schools that should be so much more. That is a blight on our country and a brick on our progress.

If I am confirmed as Secretary of Education, I will work closely with you and with all of Congress, with the President, and with educators across America to bring about real and meaningful change in the way our schools teach and our children learn because we need to get better faster. Children have only one chance for an education and children who are in school now need a better education today if they are to thrive and succeed tomorrow.

I look forward to working with the HELP Committee because you offer so much experience and knowledge on this issue. Chairman Kennedy has long been the champion of educational opportunity for all. Senators Enzi and Kennedy and the entire HELP Committee have done great work on critical education legislation in the 110th Congress, including:

- The Head Start for School Readiness Act;
- The America COMPETES Act;
- The College Cost Reduction and Access Act; and
- The Higher Education Opportunity Act.

I am eager to hear your ideas for how the Department of Education can work with the states, and support local school districts. Having been a school superintendent for seven years, I know that having a strong partner in Washington is critical -- but I also know that an overbearing federal

bureaucracy can impede innovation and progress. I look forward to working with you in the years ahead to strike the right balance.

Education has been my life's work, starting on the South Side of Chicago where I grew up along with my sister and brother, as a part of my mother's inner city after-school tutoring program, Sue Duncan's Children's Center, where I learned to, as she says "cherish every child." Her remarkable courage and dedication has been a constant source of inspiration to me. The Children's Center is an example of the type of partnership needed to support the learning of every child – in this case though a partnership among parents, community volunteers, school staff, philanthropies, and a university. With different sets of partners, examples like this across the country, in urban districts and rural communities, have demonstrated that, given opportunity and support, every child can learn. As the President-elect has said, these kids are our kids, and their education is the responsibility of us all.

I come to you after serving as the head of America's third-largest school district, serving over 400,000 mostly poor and mostly minority students. I am very proud of Chicago's progress. We have had seven years of steady gains in test scores and attendance. Our dropout rate has steadily declined while college enrollment rates have risen. We have improved the quality of teaching through better recruiting and more support for existing teachers. We've held teachers and school leaders accountable for the performance of our children – all of our children. Where they've succeeded, we've rewarded them for their work. We worked hard to involve parents more deeply in the education of their children, recognizing that schools and teachers are no substitute for a mom or dad who reads to their kids and makes sure the day's homework is done.

This has not always been easy or without difficult choices. Chicago has been one of the few districts that have held accountable chronically low-performing schools – making the tough decision to close them down and reopen them with new leadership, new staff and new educational approaches. For the most part, the results of our school turnaround program have been dramatic – boosting test scores, attendance and school morale. For all of our progress, however, I am fully aware that challenges remain – in Chicago and in schools across America.

President-elect Obama has proposed a bold agenda for meeting our educational challenges. I want to briefly outline his priorities.

First, we must invest in early childhood education. Too many children show up for kindergarten already behind. Many never catch up. The President-elect's "Zero-to-Five" proposal calls for:

- Greater supports for working parents with young children;
- Early-learning challenge grants to states;
- Voluntary universal pre-school quality enhancements; and
- More resources to build on the successes of Head Start and Early Head Start.

The President-elect also plans to establish a Presidential Early Learning Council to better integrate pre-school programs and resources.

Second, we know that teacher quality must be addressed on many levels: recruitment, preparation, retention, and compensation. As a member of the HELP Committee, Senator

Obama worked with many of you to include teaching residency programs in the Higher Education Opportunity Act. I know, from Chicago's experience, that residency programs work and President-elect Obama will make them a priority.

President-elect Obama and I will also work with you and with school leaders across America to ensure that our teachers are treated and valued as professionals. We must promote career advancement programs so that successful teachers can be instructional leaders for their colleagues. We must enable teachers to collaborate and learn from each other as members of strong professional communities. We must expand teacher compensation based on performance. And for any of this to be effective, we must do more to develop and support strong and effective principals.

Third, we know that only about 70 percent of high school students graduate. America once led the world in high school graduation, and now we're falling behind other industrialized nations. We can't continue down this path. We must identify students at risk of failure by the middle school years if not earlier – and target interventions to them. We have begun this work in Chicago, investing heavily in ninth grade transition programs. I look forward to sharing our experience with you and working with you on this issue.

We also know that many students who manage to graduate subsequently struggle in the workplace or in college. We have to increase rigor in high schools to prepare young people for the next stage of life – by boosting advanced placement participation, raising standards, and increasing learning opportunities so that they have the support they need to meet those higher standards.

I know that the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind will be a priority for the 111th Congress. I have seen first-hand the impact of the federal law on our students and schools. I have seen the law's power and its limitations. I agree with the President-elect that we should neither bury NCLB nor praise it without reservation. I support the core goals of high standards for all – black and white, poor and wealthy, students with disabilities, and those who are just learning to speak English. Like President-elect Obama, I am committed to closing achievement gaps, raising expectations and holding everyone accountable for results.

Fourth, we must make sure that our citizens have the means and the encouragement to aim for education and training beyond high school. Nearly half of the Department of Education's budget is committed to helping Americans pay for college. More than five million students from modest backgrounds receive Pell Grants, the most important financial aid program in the nation. President-elect Obama is committed to boosting Pell Grant funding and also ensuring that inflation does not eat away at their value.

One of the President-elect's signature proposals is the American Opportunity Tax Credit – \$4,000 for college in exchange for 100 hours of community service. This is more than a financial aid program. It's really a statement of our broader values: if you serve your neighbors, clean up the environment, care for the elderly, or tutor at the elementary school, you deserve help in paying for college. If confirmed, I look forward to working with Congress, the President and the Treasury Department on this proposal.

Mr. Chairman, I congratulate and thank this Committee and your colleagues in the House for the timely action you took to make certain that students would be able to get their federal loans even in the midst of the unprecedented problems in the credit markets. Prompt action by the Congress and the Education and Treasury Departments prevented disruptions for students across the country. Eight million people of all ages take advantage of federal loan programs. If confirmed, my first priority with respect to student aid will be to ensure that 100% access to student loans continues. Beyond access to loans, we need to make sure that the aid programs are managed in a way that protects taxpayers from unnecessary cost and risk, prevents students from taking on excessive and expensive debt, and offers borrowers affordable ways to repay their loans.

Federal aid is critical to helping millions of Americans attend college. Unfortunately, many talented young people who could and should be going to college are not taking advantage of that opportunity. Part of the issue is inadequate financial aid, but we must also ensure that students have the information and guidance they need to make good decisions and maximize the aid they can receive under current programs.

We should streamline the financial aid process by implementing the President-elect's proposal to allow students to apply for aid by simply checking a box on their tax forms. Enormous amounts of time and energy are wasted badgering kids to fill out this needlessly complex form. College counselors, teachers, parents and others are all pressed into service because it is so complicated. That's time they could spend more productively thinking about what to do with their lives, where to attend college, and planning their future. I applaud Congress for providing new tools under the Higher Education Opportunity Act to simplify the aid process. I vow to work closely with the higher education community and the Internal Revenue Service to advance this effort.

We also want to support community colleges, which serve almost 40 percent of America's college population. For some, community college is a more affordable route to a Bachelor's degree, while for others it's about getting job skills in growing fields like health care and technology. Many community college students are adults who are returning to school after years in the workforce or after raising a child. The President-elect has proposed additional support for community colleges and I want to work with you on that as well.

I also want to applaud the Committee's efforts to boost college enrollment for students with disabilities, curb tuition hikes, and help more students to complete college. I want to underscore this issue of student success in college. I have seen talented students graduate from high school in Chicago, only to find they were not able to build on that success in college. Some responsibility may lie with their preparation, but it may also be that the college failed to provide the engaging courses and the support and guidance that would have led that student to a degree and to a great future. This is not only the student's loss, but the nation's as well. This is an issue that the Committee has recently addressed, making important advances: improving oversight for the accreditation process; insisting on more data about student success; and shining a light on the issue of college cost. If confirmed, I am ready to implement this legislation. Indeed, the timing of the regulatory process means that I will be working on these issues from day one. Secretary Spellings and her entire staff have been extremely helpful and cooperative on this transition process – especially with respect to issues that require immediate action. I am grateful to her and will look to her for input as we move forward.

There are many other issues that the new Administration and Congress will need to tackle, including:

- Appropriately supporting students with disabilities, making sure that they are assessed fairly, and making real and necessary learning gains to meet their full potential;
- Helping English language learners to be successful, not only in learning our common language, but in gaining the knowledge and skills they need for success;
- Promoting innovation that accelerates student learning; and
- Aligning our education system not only to prepare students for the jobs of the future, but also for the responsibilities of active citizenship in our democratic society.

Under the leadership of President-elect Obama, I am deeply committed to working with you to meet these challenges, to enhance education in America, to lift our children and families out of poverty, to help our students learn to contribute to the civility of our great American democracy, and to strengthen our economy by producing a workforce that can make us as competitive as possible. This is a matter of great urgency for me, and I know it is for you as well

I also want you to know that it has always been my working style to be completely open and accessible. I believe that the best solutions are reached when every stakeholder has a voice and an opportunity to be heard. It's okay to disagree on issues, but it's not okay to refuse to listen and consider everyone's views. No one person alone has all of the answers, but together, I am absolutely confident that we can find all the answers we need.

So I look forward to working with you, with your staff, with your constituents, with the White House and with people all across America who recognize that the education of our children is our solemn obligation, our fundamental responsibility, and our greatest opportunity.

Thank you for the chance to appear before you today. I am happy to answer any questions.