

An Interview With Arne Duncan

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan sat down with *Education Week* on Jan. 17 for a wide-ranging interview, including a discussion of the waivers his administration is granting to states under the No Child Left Behind Act, attempts by Congress to rewrite the law, and challenges involving the Race to the Top program. He also touched on the 2012 election, and his own future. What follows is an edited transcript:

On Waivers

Q. The first waiver announcement is expected soon from your department. You've talked about how this is not a competition, and so you want all states that want to, and can commit to certain things, to get a waiver under No Child Left Behind. But you also say you want to keep a high bar. How do you do both?

A. I think the first goal is clearly more important, to have a high bar. The goal is not to just give a waiver to everyone. As you know, this is going to be an iterative process. We'll approve some and might come back and two weeks later and do more. ... It's going to be a rolling process, so states that want to come later can look at what's happened and learn and copy it. That's okay. That's no problem at all. And then the relationship between us and states is very different. We're going to go back and forth with states and say this looks great, you've got a challenge here, think about it in different ways. Again, no hard deadlines. This creates an opportunity for those who want it.

Q. People have been clamoring for the ability to measure growth. In reading the first 11 waiver applications, it's clear growth is a huge part of these new accountability systems. Are you worried that there will be so much emphasis on growth that you lose this desire to still get kids to a certain level of proficiency?

A. I think all of these are false choices. The only way you ever hit a high bar is by better growth. So it's growth to what? I think the challenge before was obviously that none of that got rewarded, and then the bar was, in some situations, was unattainable. I think, hopefully, what you'll see is that the country is a lot smarter than they were 10 years ago. I think some of these accountability systems will be more complex, there will be more factors, but I think it will be such a more fine-tuned system. And not that it's going to be perfect. We hope folks will be smarter two years from now than they are today. But [NCLB] was such a blunt instrument. There were so many disincentives. So many things it didn't pick up. So yeah, the growth is important to me. But look at graduation rates. Look at dropout rates. Look at our kids going to college. There's just so much more out there that folks are smart in thinking about. And I always say if you have the best 3rd-grade test scores in the world but half the kids are dropping out of high school, is that really what we want? That's not what I want. I want kids graduating from high school and prepared for college and careers and whatever they want to do. And so I think you're going to see a level of sophistication that just didn't exist 10 years ago, and we want to look at a range of factors. I think states are coming forward with some really thoughtful ideas.

Q. How does the Education Department monitor dozens of different, sophisticated state accountability systems?

A. I think about that a lot. Part of the business we should be in is managing a portfolio of states. And so it's 50 relationships. It's not insignificant, but I think it's really manageable. I think what you see us doing now with [Race to the Top] and the Implementation and Support Unit [is an example]. I just met with

the Race to the Top state teams, and I tried to ask offline, really candidly, “Are we helping you? Are we hurting you? Are we getting in the way?” And the really candid feedback was this is a different kind of partnership and people really do appreciate that. And that [Race to the Top] is sort of our first foray, but to me this is sort of the next natural step. If we were doing this at the district level, and 15,000 districts, could we manage those well? Of course not. If we were doing this at the school level, 100,000 schools, you know I’d be crazy. But can we thoughtfully manage a set of states and figure out their strengths and weaknesses and have very honest relationships with them, and build a sense of trust so that we can talk about the hard things? I think we can do that. I just left [my team in the Implementation and Support Unit] and they asked me what if a state comes up with something better two years from now? We’ve got to jump at that. I don’t want to be stuck in the mud. ... And then the other thing, just like Race to the Top, I’m not promising anyone we’re going to bat 1,000. We may grant a waiver to a state that makes its commitments in good faith but doesn’t keep them. And just to be very clear, and just as in Race to the Top, if we need to revoke the waiver six months from now, a year from now, two years from now, because folks can’t deliver on what they said, we’re more than prepared to do that.

Q. How do you hold states accountable for waivers?

A. They’re putting forward a plan. Are they executing against that plan? For example, that bottom 5 percent of schools or that 10 percent for gap schools, we’ll be able to look across the portfolio of states and look at what percent of gap schools are you moving out of that category. What’s your rate of gain? At the end of the day, it’s not the system, at the end of the day it’s student achievement. I think we’ll have a little better transparency into where folks are moving schools and students faster than others, and I hope because there’s a mix of stuff, again there’s that portfolio approach, that we’ll get better faster as a country, and we’ll better understand where things are moving. What are they doing that’s a little different? Where things aren’t moving, what are the challenges there? I think there’s going to be a level of conversation and a level of information that I think will be fascinating for folks, and it will be really beneficial.

On Enforcing the No Child Left Behind Act

Q. What about states that don’t apply for a waiver, are you willing to take away Title I money? Or how far do you go to enforce NCLB?

A. It is the law, so I think we have an obligation to enforce the law.

Q. So would you withhold money?

A. Again, not my first choice, but if it was warranted, if you had to for whatever reason there was, absolutely. (*Chief of Staff Joanne Weiss added that any money withheld likely would be state administrative money, and not the Title I dollars that go directly to benefit students.*) We want to do things the right way. Let me be really clear that I really see this as mutual accountability. If these states are feeling we are a disaster ... then I’d come back and rethink everything. This is not one-way ... We’re trying to build a very different type of relationship. We’re trying to do two things, and I don’t think this department has really done much of either: We’re trying to really support folks and give them technical assistance and help them be successful, and we’re trying to hold them accountable. I don’t know if we did much of either before. I don’t think there was much support and TA (technical assistance) and I don’t think there was much accountability. It’s hard to try and do both of those, but that’s what we’re trying to do. And again, I really want them to hold us accountable for doing both of those together in a much better way than ever has happened historically.

On Race to the Top

Q. Is Hawaii on its way to saving itself?

A. They took a big step in the right direction. I actually congratulated them publicly. But there's still a lot of hard work to go there. But are they in a better place than they were two weeks ago? Sure.

Q. How big a trouble is New York in?

A. I think the governor came up with a pretty significant plan today (Jan. 17) that makes me hopeful. But again, I just have no interest in handicapping odds. We just look at results. We just look at what the facts are. And so for every single one of these states, either they are hitting their benchmarks or they're not. And the rhetoric and the political whatever, I'm just not interested in. I'm interested in getting some work done. And again, getting work done that the state committed to that was their plan. We're just asking them to fulfill the commitments they made.

Q. What would a Race to the Top for districts look like?

A. Still working on that.

Q. Would it look a lot like the state competition?

A. We're still really thinking that through. I don't want to talk through any of the specifics, I'll just say that I love that we played at the state level. I love that we played in the early childhood space, but I'm really, really pleased now to have a chance to participate with districts, and there's a huge appetite there. There are fantastic districts doing some really creative stuff in states that are less functional that we haven't had a chance to do anything with. And these guys have been begging me: "Arne, when are we going to have a chance to play?" and so to have half a billion dollars ... I think we can have a real impact there. But what we look for ...suburban, urban and rural ... do you do consortia of districts ... I think there's a whole bunch of design stuff that we're thinking through. ... We're just really happy to be in this space and there's lots of great leadership at the local level, and lots of creativity happening there. We haven't been as supportive as I would have liked there, and this gives us a chance.

Q. Do you think you'll use all of the money for districts? Most of it?

A. No, I think we'll use it for the districts. You can do different things. You can do early childhood as a piece of that, or STEM as a piece of that. You can get at different things through it. ... I don't want to commit, but the bulk of the money will go through districts--but what we'll be asking of districts is still very much up for consideration. We're trying to talk to lots of folks on the outside to get their best advice...

On Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Q. We have a couple reauthorization bills now from the House and the Senate. Given what you've seen, is your waiver plan a stronger plan? Which would you take? Would you rather go with waivers or a reauthorization at this point?

A. No question the waivers are a stronger plan. I hope that changes. I hope at some point next month, six months from now, or next year that we get a strong bipartisan bill. Unfortunately that's not reality.

On the 2012 election

Q. Are we going to see you out on the campaign trail with the president a lot?

A. I'll do some, but obviously I don't think that's my strength. I don't think that's how I best help the country. I think the way I best help the country is to help education on this cradle-to-career continuum. So I think the more I stay really focused on the work, that's the best way I serve the country. And that's the best way I help the president. That's why he brought me in. There are a lot of folks who are a lot better politically than I am, and that's their skill set and their strength. It's not mine.

Q. Do you think education is going to be a big part of the debate? Or do you think there's not a big difference between the president and say, Mitt Romney, on education?

A. I don't know. I say all the time, you know, Republican, Democrat, Independent, I wish everyone was going to the voting booth and education was in the forefront. That's one of the things I'd love to see long-term and one of the most impactful things we could do is have every single voter regardless of politics or ideology think about what is this candidate going to do to improve the quality of education in my county, or my city, or in my state, and at the national level. And I think far too many politicians talk the talk on education and far too few walk the walk. And we have really tried to walk the walk. We want to be held accountable. And we hope everyone is thinking about this as they make decisions. I just think this is the biggest issue facing our country. For me, the debate is never the problem. I love the debate and the conversation. For me the enemy is not to do something differently. I welcome that. The real enemy, I always say, is complacency, to think that we're somehow good enough educationally. ... People wonder why we're struggling economically. If there was a lot more awareness, if there was a lot more understanding and a much greater sense of urgency, that would be very, very healthy for the country.

On His Future

Q. If the president is re-elected, will you stay on for his second term?

A. I'll have to see if he's sick of me first.

Q. And if he's not?

A. I'd love to stay. These three years have gone ... it's ridiculous how fast these three years have gone. It's scary. This work takes a long time. I believe in life you have to stay with stuff. I said repeatedly I desperately wanted to do 10 years in Chicago. I did 7 ½, and literally this was the only job in the world that I would have left Chicago for. And I don't think there's a job in the world that I would leave this for. You gotta stick with this work, stick with it for the long, long haul.

Q. Eight years?

A. Who knows down the road? But I think we've come a heck of a long way. But I know how far we have to go. The reality today is we're still 16th in the world for college graduation rates, we still have a dropout rate that's unacceptably high. And so we've got a lot of hard work ahead of us. And you gotta stay with it.