

**U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan
Press Conference Call
On Education Reform Blueprint
Monday, March 15, 2010**

Coordinator: Good morning and thank you for standing by. At this time all participants are in a listen only mode. During the question and answer session you may press star, 1 to ask a question.

Today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections you may disconnect at this time. And now I'd like to turn the meeting over to the press secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, Ms. Sandra Abrevaya. Ma'am, you may begin.

Sandra Abrevaya: Hi everyone. Thank you for joining today. We have Secretary Duncan here. He'll make a few remarks and then open it up for Q&A. Thanks.

Arne Duncan: Thanks all of you for joining us and we think we have a huge opportunity to improve the quality of education that our students around the country receive. And we also feel a huge sense of urgency.

By every measure the United States is not leading the world. Whether it's college graduation rates or whether it's eighth grade algebra scores, we have a long way to go. We have a drop out rate that is absolutely unacceptable, 27

percent nationally. More than a quarter of our students drop out of schools each year and that is economically unsustainable and morally unacceptable.

So we feel a huge urgency but also a real opportunity and through this blueprint in reauthorizing ESCA, we hope to raise standards, we want to reward excellence and success and we want to increase local control and flexibility. We have got to get accountability right so that it drives improvement in student achievement, gives parents the information they need and identifies effective teachers and leaders.

In accountability we're going to build around a meaningful goal, true college and career readiness. We're going to reward schools that show the most growth and ability to close achievement gaps so we'll have laser-like focus there. For the vast majority of schools we're going to get rid of prescriptive intervention.

We'll be giving them flexibility to define how they will meet their performance targets. Getting accountability right helps drive reform and accelerate student achievement. It ensures that students have a wide breadth of knowledge and are making progress towards a meaningful goal.

It gives schools the incentives to improve the achievement of all students, not just that tiny percent around that bubble who are close to getting to proficiency. It allows us to identify effective teachers and measure whether teacher preparation programs are working.

And we look forward to working in a bipartisan way with Congress. I will always give the previous administration credit for shining the spotlight on achievement gaps, focusing on (class space) reform and the idea of disaggregating data.

But so much as we traveled the country over this past year visiting over 37 states, rural, urban, suburban communities talking to hundreds and hundreds of teachers and parents and principals, a number of clear challenges with the previous law showed up time and time again.

The previous law was too punitive. It was too prescriptive. It lowered the bar for students and too often narrowed the curriculum and we have to flip all of that. We have to raise the bar - high standards for all students, meaningful college and career ready standards.

We have to reward success, reward excellence and focus much more on growth. How much are students improving each year? We have to increase local flexibility and give great teachers, great principals a chance to innovate and hit the higher bar.

And then finally we have to do much more to ensure that students are getting a well-rounded curriculum not just in high school but from the earliest of ages. So I'll stop there and take any questions you might have and Carmel Martin is here with me as well.

Coordinator: Thank you. Once again if you would like to ask a question please press star, 1. You'll be prompted to record your first and last name and organization. To withdraw a question you may press star, 2. Once again if you have a question please press star, 1 at this time. One moment for our first question. Our first question comes from Sarah Sparks, Title1admin.com. And your line is open.

Sarah Sparks: Good morning, Secretary. I have a question about the accountability system that you're proposing. One, could you explain how accountability will work

or if there will be federal accountability for schools above that lowest 10 percent?

It seems you're getting rid of most of the interventions that are required under NCLB now. So will those schools have any accountability if they aren't in the lowest 10 percent?

Arne Duncan: Sure. Great question. Basically we see schools in three large buckets. First of all there is a set of very, very high performing schools around the country and again not focused just on absolute test scores but on growth and gain.

And we want to identify those high performing schools, we want to reward them. We want to give them increased flexibility and economy and we want to learn their lessons. Secondly, there is a large group of schools in the middle and we want to help them continue to improve and measure their progress against their benchmarks going forward.

And then there are those schools at the bottom we talked about. It's not just the lowest performing. We're also very concerned about schools where the overall performance might be relatively high but where there are large and unimproving achievement gaps.

And so we are going to challenge the status quo there. And so across the spectrum we'll be looking to get dramatically better. The key here is not that we're getting rid of interventions. It's just we're not mandating what intervention is the right thing to do. We don't think we can micromanage 95,000 schools from Washington.

We think local educators, we're going to hold them accountable for results and measure their progress but we're going to really challenge them to figure

out what's the right set of interventions or support that schools need to continue to improve. And I think that's a fundamental change - reward excellence at the top. There are almost no rewards for excellence - many ways to fail but very few rewards for success and for growth under previous law.

We want to fundamentally change that. We want to hold those schools in the middle accountable for continued progress and really let local educators demonstrate their ability to do the right thing by children. And in those schools that are either chronically underperforming or have stubbornly large and unmovable achievement gaps, we're going to push very hard for change there.

Sarah Sparks: Thank you, Secretary.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Nia Henderson with Politico.

Nia Henderson: Hi there. Thanks for doing this call. I wonder what you make of some of the union criticism, the two largest unions have come out and said they're disappointed with this replan, they're disappointed that it still relies so heavily on testing.

And also they feel like there is an undue burden placed on teachers. What do you make of their criticism and how are you going to bring those folks onboard?

Arne Duncan: Yeah. I have great, great respect for Dennis Van Roekel and Randi Weingarten. I think they are real reformers and we all continue to work together as there is absolute commitment there to challenge the status quo and get better.

I will say what's interesting is that in the past I would agree with that critique that all the onus of responsibility, all the accountability was simply at the school level. What maybe they didn't fully see in what we're doing or fully understand is how much this is now a shared responsibility.

Not only are we focusing just on schools but we're focusing on school districts and we're focusing on states. And so there is much more shared responsibility, in fact, there is shared accountability, than anything that existed prior. Districts and states weren't a part of the previous law. It would be under our proposal.

Secondly, we're making unprecedented investments to put teachers in a position to be successful. We have a funding pool around teachers and leaders that is up to \$3.85 billion - it's a \$350 million increase and we want to give teachers the support, the time for collaboration, the mentoring, the better career ladders - all those things that teachers need to be successful and that haven't happened.

We want to put huge resources behind that. Third, one of the biggest critiques I always hear amongst teachers is sometimes they don't get enough principal support. And leadership matters and great principals attract great teachers and retain great teachers.

And as a department with historically significantly underinvested in principal preparation, we're going to put some significant resources behind that. So whether it's broadening out accountability and the shared responsibility we have, again not just the individual schools but the districts in which they lie and the states.

And we're going to be identifying again districts that are doing a great job of moving schools and districts where there isn't improvement. The same goes for states. A huge investment in supporting teachers and recognizing and rewarding excellence, which has never happened before and better training principals so that they can do a better job of helping teachers.

We think there is much here that is going to be very, very beneficial to teachers. And for the first time really recognize the extraordinary hard work that goes on in literally hundreds of thousands of classrooms around the country every single day.

Nia Henderson: Thanks so much for taking the question.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Patricia Mazzei with Miami Herald.

Patricia Mazzei: Hi. Good morning, Secretary. I was wondering how you're going to give states an incentive to make these college and career ready standards. What does that mean exactly and how are you going to measure them?

Arne Duncan: Well, if you may know and if you could go back on mute please, there's a little bit of background noise on your phone. As you may know, this effort is being led entirely at the local level. We have 48 states, 48 governors, 48 state school team officers working together to create higher standards.

And this is an idea whose time has come. A couple of years ago this was the third rail of education. Today they're providing extraordinary leadership. The heads of both unions, the AFT and the NEA are absolutely on board and supportive. The business community has been crying out for this.

Major nonprofits like the College Board and Achieve want this to happen. So this isn't coming from us. These won't be national standards or federal standards. This is coming at the local level. Behind that we want to create the next generation of great assessment.

And what we have done through Race to the Top is create a pot of money, \$350 million, to invest again in states. They want to create much more comprehensive, more thorough assessments. And so this leadership is being driven at the local level and that's where it should be.

And we think this is a fundamental game changer. This is going to revolutionize education in this country. It will take a little bit of time to transition to get states to that point but I could not be more pleased and proud of the progress that they are making.

Patricia Mazzei: Thank you.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Dan Gorenstein, New Hampshire Public Radio.

Dan Gorenstein: Hey, Secretary. Thank you for taking the question. I'm really curious, it seems like charter schools are a remedy for struggling schools. But I'm wondering what about high achieving schools and the high achieving districts? Do you think (Nutria) for example should have a charter school?

Arne Duncan: That's really up to that community. So I think new schools and better models again, whether it's charters or other types of innovative schools, are needed where there are lack of quality options.

And so that's going to depend community by community but that should be driven at the community level, not by us.

Dan Gorenstein: Thank you.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Nick Anderson with the Washington Post.

Nick Anderson: Hi Mr. Secretary. Thank you for your time. I wondered if you can tell us a little bit about how accountability would work in this transition period? A lot of schools don't look three or four years out in front.

They're looking like next year, the year after. And a few weeks ago you said that you didn't have a decision yet on whether you wanted to get rid of the 2014 deadline. Can you just walk us through this time this year, next year and the year after to 2014?

Arne Duncan: I think I'll let Carmel jump in. As you know, Nick, that's going to vary state by state based on very different places. Some states already have a very high bar, have college and career ready standards. Other states are much further behind the curve. So I can't walk you through the 50 different scenarios. I can tell you that we're going to hope and encourage states to make this transition as quickly as they can. But for some states for this fall obviously standards won't be in place. New assessments won't be in place. So it's going to take some time and that's going to vary state by state.

Carmel Martin: Nick, as we discussed before, the transition period will be most relevant in terms of identifying performance targets since those new standards and assessments aren't yet in place.

But what we are clear on is that in the meantime we would still have a strong system of accountability in place. We will work with Congress in determining what those performance targets should look like in the meantime. But many of

the pieces of our accountability framework could be implemented right away. For example, we're already asking states to identify the bottom 5 percent of their schools and taking dramatic action to turn those schools around.

We have put \$4 billion on the table to do it so that is something that we want to get going on even before the authorization happens. We can also ask states to start to identify the schools with the largest achievement gaps. We have asked for funding in our budget tied to reauthorization around establishing a rewards and incentive program.

So many of the components of the accountability system we're proposing can be implemented right away and we'll work with Congress and others in terms of defining what the performance targets should be in the meantime.

Nick Anderson: Thank you.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Christine Amario with the Associated Press.

Christine Armario: Hi, Secretary. Thank you for taking our question. Since you describe this as being a bipartisan bill, can you talk about the reaction you have gotten so far from Republican lawmakers?

Arne Duncan: Folks have been very, very supportive and actually the whole reason we put out the blueprint in the first place was in response to bipartisan leadership in the House and Senate asking us to put forward a vision.

And so again, across the board folks have been very, very thoughtful, very engaged. I will tell you our staff and staffs from many of the offices have been working long, long hours for a month now. And just very encouraged where

this is going and I think this is the one issue that everybody around the country can come together behind.

And folks know that politics and ideology should be put to the side and we need to do as a country what's right for children. What's been most encouraging is everybody shares our sense of urgency. Nobody thinks we are where we need to be as a country educationally whether you see this from the point of an economic imperative or folks who talk about how this impacts national security or whether you see this as a civil rights of our generation and whether you view it through all three of those lenses.

Everybody wants us to get better and we're going to continue to work in a bipartisan way. That's the only way we have said from day one that we want to work and I couldn't be more pleased by the thoughtfulness, the commitment and the level of engagement and sense of urgency that we've seen in meeting after meeting. It's been pretty remarkable.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Amber Arellano from the Detroit News.

Amber Arellano: Hi, Secretary Duncan. Thanks for taking our calls. You mentioned three buckets of schools, the third being low performers. And you discussed that you really want to push hard on these schools that have stubborn, unmoving achievement gaps.

What are you going to be incentivizing particular strategies to do that? And is this - I imagine this will be separate from Race to the Top. How will that work in terms of pushing very hard?

Arne Duncan: Yeah. Well, it's interesting Race to the Top has sort of gotten all the press and publicity but we have - that was \$4 billion and we have \$3.5 billion, almost the same amount, just for that bottom 5 percent of schools.

So we have a huge investment in school improvement grants that Carmel talked about earlier. And yeah, we have a couple different models that are out there that the districts can look at but what we're saying is there has to be a sense of urgency. There are far too many of these places, these schools.

What we're looking for is not just low performing but chronically low performing where things aren't getting better. And there are far too many places this hasn't been true just for a year or two years or even five years, sometimes it's been true for literally decades.

And the one thing we're saying that isn't going to work is doing nothing, standing on the sidelines. And so we're really challenging states and districts to take this head on. We're putting unprecedented resources on the table to support that innovation but we have to get very, very serious about this.

And I think if we do that we will change not just these students but the opportunity structure in the communities surrounding these schools forever and that's the kind of ambition we're looking for.

Amber Arellano: You have a carrot in place to do that. Is there a stick in place for states and districts that don't deal with those schools?

Arne Duncan: Well, they have to deal with them.

Amber Arellano: They have to.

Arne Duncan: They have to deal with them. Yeah.

Amber Arellano: And why do they have to deal with them? I mean what's the mechanism to force them to do that?

Carmel Martin: Our proposal calls for states to identify the 5 percent of schools in the state with the largest stagnating achievement gaps. They are required to implement a research based intervention to tackle the weakness that is causing them to be on that list.

So they have to provide services to ... students who are causing the gap. And if after three years they still show no improvement the school will lose control of its Title I funding.

Amber Arellano: Okay.

Arne Duncan: So we're trying to do both carrots and sticks, the incentive to do the right thing but a real stick at the back end if we don't see movement.

Amber Arellano: Okay. Great. Thank you.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Elizabeth Green, Gotham Schools.

Elizabeth Green: Hi, Secretary. My question is about the accountability system too. And at least in New York we have so many accountability systems now that it's hard to know. A school could be in like 10 statuses at the same time. So my question is kind of two questions really.

Sorry for doing that. One is what is your approach to dealing with this confusion of labels. And then secondly, is there any accountability system that

you're looking at around the country that you think is a good one to model on, that this blueprint draws on?

Arne Duncan: We think again that's a good point. Sometimes these things get so complex and convoluted they lose their meaning. And we wanted to do something that was really simple that parents could understand, that students could understand, that teachers and school administrators could understand.

So we think this is a very common sense approach. We didn't draw from just one example. We looked at models around the country. We want every school to have a report card and have real transparency so that parents and the community can evaluate each year.

And again, we're absolutely focused on growth and gain, how much are schools improving their variety of factors? But we think this is a logical, understandable system and what happened I think in the No Child Left Behind is interesting. Like all these schools, eventually every school is going to be labeled a failure.

And to me there is a real problem with that. There are actually schools there that were getting better and better but the labels were wrong. They were mislabeled, they were stigmatized. It was confusing and demoralizing. So we want to avoid that.

There are schools that are struggling and we'll support those. But then there are schools that are absolutely the bottom and unfortunately nothing changed there. So they got a label but nothing changed for the students. And so we're trying to flip that. And again, high performing, high growth schools, we want to shine a real spotlight there.

Schools that are getting better each year but not yet world class, we're going to continue to support them. But we want to be very tough minded. It's the bottom where things simply are not working for children where we have drop outs that increase, we want to move with a real sense of urgency.

So we tried to take the best from a number of different places but also make it simple enough for parents to really comprehend. If only some statistician or some quantum mathematician can figure the assessment system out then it really loses power and we try to avoid that.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Charlotte Howard with The Economist.

Charlotte Howard: Hello, Secretary. I just had a question returning to an earlier point about the three buckets of schools. For the large bucket in the middle you talked about the federal government being less prescriptive. Is there any pressure from the federal government for those schools to improve? Or will that be wholly left to districts and states?

Arne Duncan: No. There is significant pressure because again, we're looking at growth. If those schools start to stagnate they're going to end up in that bottom category. And if they are really improving, so again, we're trying to do a lot here with both carrots and sticks.

So significant carrots so that they can move into that top performing category, more resources, more flexibility. And if they are stagnating and achievement gaps aren't closing they will by definition drop into that bottom bucket. And so every school has to be looking to get better, every school has to be improving, every school has to have a plan.

What's different about this is we're not going to dictate, we're not going to be prescriptive about what those events are. So carrots and sticks across the board, rewards and consequences but really trying to let local educators, empower local educators to figure out what their children and their community needs.

Charlotte Howard: Thank you.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Claudio Sanchez, National Public Radio.

Claudio Sanchez: Hello, Secretary Duncan. Could you clarify something for me? I believe you just said or someone on your staff just said that of the 5000 schools that are really struggling unless they improve in three years you would withdraw federal aid from those schools? Is that correct?

Carmel Martin: No. Claudio, it was me Carmel Martin. First of all I was referring to the schools with the largest achievement gaps, which is different from the schools in the bottom 5 percent overall.

And we are not going to cut their funding. We're just going to have the state take control of how the money is spent in that school, the idea being that we have given them a chance to improve the performance for that group of students who is causing a stagnant achievement gap and they still haven't shown any improvement.

So we need to bring in other folks to help them tackle the problem in that school.

Claudio Sanchez: In other words the decision will be local in terms of what strategies they use to make that or help that school improve?

Carmel Martin: Yes.

Claudio Sanchez: And just as a follow up, on the question of again unions saying look, you're putting too big a burden on us teachers, there seems to be an enormous amount of anxiety about how the federal government will now step in to define effectiveness, to fund effectiveness.

And I guess that's what some people think is unprecedented here, the degree to which the federal government has a hand in determining who is effective and what teachers are not, that that is essentially reaching too far into local decisions.

Arne Duncan: Claudio, we're not deciding that. That's going to be decided at the local level. So teacher evaluations, folks who work on that, everybody led by the unions think that teacher evaluation is broken and that is going to be done at the state and local level. So we're not defining that here at all.

Claudio Sanchez: Okay.

Arne Duncan: Yeah. What we're saying is that student achievement matters and we want to see students learning. The other thing Claudio, I just can't emphasize enough that under previous law the entire accountability focused just on that individual school.

We know schools don't exist independent of their support in the communities. So for the first time ever we're holding districts accountable and rewarding districts who are seeing growth. And we'll have consequences when we're not improving and the same thing at the state level.

So more than ever before this is a shared responsibility, shared accountability. Schools, districts and states and obviously the relationship where you see high functioning relationships, all those things move together, where you see dysfunctional relationships, all those different parties stagnate.

And this is a major, major change that we're holding not just schools but districts and states accountable for improving student achievement.

Claudio Sanchez: Thank you.

Coordinator: Our final question comes from Wangui Njuguna with Education Daily.

Wangui Njuguna: I just wanted to go back to the accountability and the school turn around model. The unions are criticizing that as saying if you fire 50 percent of the teachers where are you going to be able to replace them with effective teachers? If you could please address that issue.

Arne Duncan: Well, no one is saying they have to fire 50 percent of the teachers. So there are a main couple models there and you have a model where no teachers get fired. So again, that decision is always made at the local level. That is not our decision.

And so different states, different districts, different schools will have many different answers but in no case are we saying you have to fire X percent of teachers. If a district decides to do that they can rehire and they would only - I can only assume they would only do that if they were absolutely confident they could bring in more effective teachers.

But again, that decision is never going to be made by us. That is always going to be made at the local level.

Sandra Abrevaya: Thank you everybody for joining us today.

Coordinator: Thank you for participating in today's conference. You may disconnect at this time.

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