

## THE NATION'S PULSE

# Obama's New Teacher

By RiShawn Biddle on 10.15.10 @ 6:07AM

President Barack Obama and his Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, have spent the past two years beating back the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and their allies to reform the nation's woeful public schools. By November 3, Obama and Duncan may find themselves with a different obstacle in the form of Republican Minnesota Congressman John Kline. With Republicans poised to win back control of the House of Representatives, the former Marine Colonel and think tank executive will be reshaping federal education policy as chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee.

A former Marine helicopter pilot who once commanded air operations during the occupation of Somalia, Kline is most fond of talking about his time carrying the nuclear "football" for President Reagan and flying the presidential helicopter, Marine One. Kline can also thank Obama for his current spot as Ranking Republican on the Education and Labor Committee; it was Obama's appointment of Kline's former House colleague, John McHugh, as Secretary of the Army last year that prompted the musical chairs that led to Kline ascending to the position.

But unlike current education committee chairman -- and Obama favorite -- George Miller, Kline won't be carrying anything on his behalf. Kline has long opposed Race to the Top, the \$4.3 billion competitive grant initiative that is the centerpiece of Obama's reform efforts. From his perspective, "it was irresponsible" for congressional Democrats to give Secretary of Education Duncan \$5 billion "with no strings attached." Kline also doesn't like that the administration required adoption of Common Core, a set of academic standards in English, math, and science, to win Race to the Top funds; he calls it a step toward creating a national curriculum.

Kline isn't likely to go for Obama's request to increase Race to the Top funding by another \$1 billion. Says Kline: "Why should Congress give more money to a program that hasn't proven itself?" The skepticism is warranted. Race to the Top, along with the willingness of Obama and Duncan to use their respective bully pulpits, has convinced legislators in states such as California, Michigan and Massachusetts to eliminate restrictions on the expansion of charter schools and on the use of student test score data in evaluating teachers. But in choosing states such as Delaware (which weakened reform measures to gain NEA and AFT

support) and Maryland (which didn't even offer much in the way of measurable reform), the Obama administration has disappointed school reformers of all stripes, especially those championing more serious measures.

With Kline in the chairmanship, Obama will have less of a free hand (and less backing) for the more expansive elements of his agenda. Kline in particular is ready to ditch parts of the No Child Left Behind Act, the federal education law that has been the bane of teachers unions and school districts alike, proclaiming that it is overreach into an area that shouldn't be a federal concern. This stance, along with his support for vouchers, charter schools, and other school choice measures, is certainly pleasing to the ears of conservative school reformers and their more movement-oriented allies in the Republican grassroots.

BUT CONSERVATIVE SCHOOL REFORMERS won't necessarily be pleased with the rest of Kline's plans. He also argues that the best way to reform education is to return to local control or essentially letting traditional school districts do as they please. These districts, as even Kline admits, are among the most fervent opponents of choice, along with teachers unions and other defenders of traditional public education. After nearly two centuries, local control has proved to be of little value to students (who get stuck in mediocre schools) and taxpayers (who pay all too dearly for them). Choice advocates, who have battled with school districts for the past three decades, will be particularly displeased.

School reform-minded Republican governors such as Indiana's Mitch Daniels and Kline's fellow Minnesotan, Tim Pawlenty, may also be disappointed with Kline's emphasis on dialing back the No Child Left Behind Act. As with Race to the Top, No Child has actually expanded state authority over education; governors have successfully used the accountability rules, mandates, and statistical measurements to rally support for their efforts and defeat school districts and teachers union affiliates.

Kline also opposes Obama's effort to apply the clever competition model at the heart of Race to the Top (the reason why states embrace school choice and subject teachers to private-sector style performance management) to the rest of the \$152 billion spent annually by the federal government on public education because he feels it will further politicize federal funding. But the competitive grant approach appeals to conservative school reformers, who, like many centrist Democrats, feel that the traditional program-centered approach to federal education funding is wasteful and hasn't improved quality of education.

Some conservative reformers already have mixed feelings. "In sum, the old GOP education agenda isn't what 21st century America needs and recycling it, while surely easier and perhaps safer than thinking anew, isn't going to do the job," proclaim Chester Finn Jr. and Michael Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the leading think tank among conservative reformers.

This dissonance isn't surprising. There is almost as much disagreement on education policy (and school reform) in GOP ranks as there is among centrist reformers and teachers unions within Democratic Party ranks.

School choice supporters such as the Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute scholar Andrew Coulson -- who embrace a small-government philosophy -- constantly bicker with organizations such as the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which advocate with centrist Democrats for a stronger federal role in enacting more rigorous curriculum standards. Both, in turn, have fought with suburban Republicans -- including congressional leaders such as Kline -- who count on support from school superintendents, parents who still think public schools are still doing a fine job of educating their kids, and (to a lesser extent) teachers-union bosses.

The reality is that for all the small government rhetoric, Republicans and conservatives alike have supported expansive federal education policy when it suits them. It was the Reagan Administration that nurtured the modern school reform movement in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, which called for improving (and standardizing) curricula and academic standards. Obama's own reform efforts are a continuation of those of his predecessor, George W. Bush, who, with the help of then-education committee chairman John Boehner, passed No Child. Another pet project of conservative reformers, the now-shuttered D.C. Opportunity school voucher program, was established by the then Republican-controlled Congress in 2003 (admittedly, at the behest of residents frustrated with the woeful school district).

Kline's ascension could prove to be as vexing for school reform-minded conservatives as it will be likely be for Obama and his centrist Democrat school reform allies. He may also be less successful in expanding the kind of school choice options conservatives hold dear. Instead, Kline and other congressional Republicans may end up forcing the GOP ranks into the kind of uncomfortable conversations that have fueled civil war among Democrats.

The only beneficiaries may turn out to be the very teachers unions both Kline and Obama count as their opposition.

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