



John King Jr. to Replace Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education

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John King Jr., currently the acting deputy secretary of education at the U.S. Department of Education, will become acting U.S. secretary of education in December.

King will replace his current boss, Secretary Arne Duncan, in December.

Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, says Duncan had more power than any other secretary of education has to date.

"The first thing that's important to note is that ultimately [Duncan] does what the president wants," McCluskey said. "Big expansion of government and particularly Executive [Branch] control over education. Suddenly, he had a whole lot of power through Race to the Top money and through waivers. He's probably had the most influence over education out of [all] the secretaries of education. Duncan is less of an outgoing character, but he had more power [and] influence."

Accusations of Elitism

McCluskey says Duncan's low point was when he referred to parents who oppose Common Core as "white suburban moms who [feel]—all of a sudden—their child isn't as brilliant as they thought they were, and their school isn't quite as good as they thought they were.

"[Duncan] acted as if he deserved the power and he was using it for perfect good," said McCluskey.

McCluskey says the waivers are illegal and the implementation of Common Core standards in many states has been an example of federal overreach.

"I think that kind of blew up in the administration's face," said McCluskey. "[Duncan] was tone-deaf in the way he tried to engage the public. Instead of listening to them, he basically lectured them."

Frederick Hess, a resident scholar and director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, says Duncan overstepped his boundaries as head of the Department of Education.

"Arne Duncan is a good man who has exhibited an impressive and sincere commitment to the nation's students," said Hess. "Moreover, many of the ideas he has championed—like better teacher

evaluation and evidence-based grant-making—are good ones. Unfortunately, he wound up championing his agenda in troubling, divisive ways and in a manner that has created worrisome precedents. His sincere commitment too often manifested itself as a disregard for limits on the federal role and for possible unintended consequences of a too-heavy federal hand. Duncan’s personal virtues will be missed, but his departure presents a welcome opportunity for the Obama administration to engage in a much-needed course correction.

“Duncan took office with a wealth of stimulus funding at his disposal, and he used it to create a 19-category Race to the Top checklist that pushed states to sign on to the administration’s preferred reform agenda,” Hess said. “He employed waivers from No Child Left Behind in a manner that was certainly lawless to compel states to double down on those same reforms. He dismissed those raising concerns about the Common Core as a ‘fringe,’ [and he] worked to shutter the Washington, DC Opportunity Scholarship program while touting his support for school choice ... [showing] little interest in working with Congress to fix an NCLB [program] that he repeatedly deemed ‘broken.’”

Hoping for Change

Hess says he is hopeful there will be a change in the way the Obama administration addresses education policy once King replaces Duncan.

“John King is an impassioned, thoughtful, and eloquent leader with deep experience in schools and state-level leadership,” Hess said. “I’m pleased to see him in this role. I’m hopeful he will build on the more promising elements of Duncan’s tenure, while correcting for some of the missteps of the past seven years.”

Doubts About King

New York state Assemblyman Raymond Walter (R-Amherst) says he doesn’t think King will be any better than Duncan. King previously served as commissioner of education of the State of New York, and in 2013 he launched a listening tour in response to the state adopting Common Core standards.

“You look at what’s happened over the last 10 years with education and the federalization of it, and Arne Duncan is certainly in the middle of that,” said Walter. “John King is more of the same. John King is somebody who doesn’t listen to teachers, doesn’t listen to parents, and pushes his own agenda.

“They just screwed it up so terribly here in New York,” said Walter of King, who supported Common Core as more than 200,000 parents opted their children out of testing aligned to the controversial standards. “It was a disaster.”

King refused to listen to the will of taxpayers, Walter says.

“He’s a firm believer in Common Core, right to the bone,” said Walter. “Every time I’ve heard him speak, it’s always a lecture and not a conversation. He enflamed so many people when he was doing this supposed listening tour. Shutting people down when they were speaking, avoiding questions, sermonizing.

“I wouldn’t expect anything to change with national education policy with John King in charge,” said Walter. “It’s going to be more of the same.”