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## Why So Many People are So Angry At Arne Duncan

Education Secretary Arne Duncan's speech today about the future of No Child Left Behind explains why people who had hoped that President Obama's education team would make a clean break with "No Child Left Behind" are angry.

Duncan called today for changes in the NCLB law that sparked an era in which high-stakes standardized tests drove K-12 education.

But he sounded less like he had seen the real folly in NCLB and more like someone who thinks "tougher" standards will solve what ails many public schools. He said:

*"Until states develop better assessments.... we must rely on standardized tests to monitor progress -- but this is an important area for reform and an important conversation to have.*

*"I also agree with some NCLB critics: it unfairly labeled many schools as failures even when they were making progress -- it places too much emphasis on raw test scores rather than student growth -- and it is overly prescriptive in some ways while it is too blunt an instrument of reform in others.*

*"But the biggest problem with NCLB is that it doesn't encourage high learning standards. In fact, it inadvertently encourages states to lower them. The net effect is that we are lying to children and parents by telling kids they are succeeding when they are not."*

Duncan should know better than to declare that the biggest problem with NCLB is that standards weren't high enough. We can have the highest standards in the universe, and they can have no affect on achievement if the school environment around them is unhealthy--and if kids being taught the standards don't eat properly, can't see well and don't get enough sleep.

NCLB did not improve student achievement because its prescription for reform--high-stakes standardized tests and a sanctions regime that penalized schools for failing to raise test scores--has nothing to do with the way students learn or real academic achievement.

Standardized test scores alone are not valid indicators of how well anybody does their job--not a teacher and not a student. Researchers have shown this over and over, yet policymakers continue to ignore the evidence.

So far, Duncan has made clear that he plans, at least for now, to continue the use of standardized tests that we know are driving teachers to narrow curriculum, to continue NCLB's sanctions regime, and to pay and evaluate teachers based on student test scores.

Duncan now presides over a \$4.35 billion "Race to the Top" fund that is giving out grants to school districts that propose reforms that the education department approves.

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Among the things the department has said it will be looking for are plans that tie teacher evaluations to standardized test scores and a push for more charter schools—even though there is no evidence that charter schools are by and large any better than the traditional public schools in their neighborhoods. (Yes, some are, but many aren't, and it is unclear why Duncan would want to base any policy on such an uneven record of success.)

Andrew Coulson, director of the non-profit [Cato Institute's](#) Center for Educational Freedom, wrote today:

*"In light of the abject and expensive failure of federal intrusion in America's classrooms, it is irresponsible for the Secretary of Education to assume without debate that this intrusion should continue. Cutting all federal k-12 education programs would result in a permanent \$70 billion annual tax cut."*

The sorry state of education affairs has persuaded some educators to change their minds about key education issues. Author Diane Ravitch, a former education official in the administration of President George H.W. Bush and a research professor at New York University, wrote this week in the blog that she writes with progressive educator Deborah Meier, [Bridging Differences](#):

*"I have only recently recognized the ways in which pressure to raise scores, mainly prompted by NCLB, has corrupted testing and accountability."*

*Our policymakers have fallen in love with the idea that incentives and sanctions can "drive" educational improvement. They believe that if we promise rewards when test scores go up, we will see test scores go up. So they commit hundreds of millions of dollars to give "merit pay" or "performance pay" to teachers and principals, even to students—if the scores rise. Simultaneously, they threaten to inflict serious sanctions on those schools, principals, and teachers if their students' test scores do not go up. They don't dock their pay, but do something worse: They threaten to close their schools, fire the staff, and tarnish the reputation of anyone who taught there....."*

*"I fear that American education has now entered into a twilight zone, where nothing is what it appears to be, where numbers are meaningless, where public relations and spin take the place of honest reporting, where fraud is called progress."*

Many people were hoping that Duncan would lead K-12 education out of this twilight zone. So far there aren't many signs that he will.

By Valerie Strauss | September 24, 2009; 2:20 PM ET

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