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The golden boy and the blob

May 7th 2009

 From *The Economist* print edition

Is Barack Obama's education secretary too good to be true?



IT IS hard to find anybody with a bad word to say about Arne Duncan, Barack Obama's young education secretary. Margaret Spellings, his predecessor in the Bush administration, calls him "a visionary leader and fellow reformer". During his confirmation hearings Lamar Alexander, a senator from Tennessee and himself a former education secretary, sounded more like a lovesick schoolgirl than a member of the opposition party: "I think you're the best." Enthusiastic without being over-the-top, pragmatic without being a pushover, he is also the perfect embodiment of *mens sana in corpore sano*—tall and lean, clean-cut and athletic, a Thomas Arnold for the digital age.

Since moving to the Education Department a couple of months ago he has been a tireless preacher of the reform gospel. He supports charter schools and merit pay, accountability and transparency, but also litters his speeches with more unfamiliar ideas. He argues that one of the biggest problems in education is how to attract and use talent. All too often the education system allocates the best teachers to the cushiest schools rather than the toughest. Mr Duncan also stresses the importance of "replicating" success. His department, he says, should promote winning ideas (such as "Teach for America", a programme that sends high-flying university graduates to teach in underserved schools) rather than merely enforcing the status quo.

Nor is this just talk. Mr Duncan did much to consolidate his reputation as a reformer on May 6th, when the White House announced that it will try to extend

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The Department of Education has Mr Duncan's biography. The Washington Scholarship Fund has information about the voucher scheme.

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Washington, DC's voucher programme until all 1,716 children taking part have graduated from high school.

The Democrat-controlled Congress has been trying to smother the programme by removing funding. But Mr Duncan has vigorously argued that it does not make sense "to take kids out of a school where they're happy and safe and satisfied and learning".

He and Mr Obama will now try to persuade Congress not to kill the programme.

Mr Duncan is arguably the luckiest education secretary since Jimmy Carter created his department in 1979. He inherits a much richer legacy from the Bush administration than most people imagine, with mounting evidence that George Bush's No Child Left Behind Act did something to boost educational achievement, particularly among poor children. And a growing number of Democrats, many of them black, think the party needs to distance itself from the teachers' unions. Cory Booker, the mayor of Newark, argues that "as Democrats we have been wrong on education, and it's time to get it right."

At the same time, Mr Duncan is being showered with money by his boss. The stimulus bill will provide him with an extra \$100 billion to improve America's schools, the biggest educational windfall in the country's history. He also has a \$5 billion budget for the specific purpose of encouraging educational innovation.

Mr Duncan is the perfect man to capitalise on these opportunities. His mother founded and ran an after-school programme for poor children on Chicago's South Side. He spent seven years as the CEO of the Chicago public schools, the third-largest system in the country, closing bad schools and shifting resources to more successful ones. He also has the most valuable resource of any ambitious reformer—a close bond with the president. They have a Harvard education in common, along with roots in Chicago's Hyde Park district, and frequently play basketball together.

Mr Obama, too, is passionate about education, convinced that it holds the key to two of his most cherished domestic reforms: narrowing the income gap between rich and poor and boosting the productivity of the average worker. The president and his wife are living examples of how education can achieve the American dream. Mr Duncan seldom fails to remind his audience that, thanks to the first family, "Never before has being smart been so cool." On May 6th the president also demonstrated that he is willing to annoy the teachers' unions, who regard Washington's school-voucher programme as the spawn of the devil.


Enemies of promise

Yet it is hard to suppress a feeling that all this is too good to be true. To begin with, Messrs Duncan and Obama have given the voucher scheme only a stay of execution. No new children will be admitted to the scheme, despite its popularity with poor Washingtonians. The stay of execution had a lot to do with political expediency. Ending the scheme immediately would not only have disrupted the education of 1,700 children; it would also have exposed both Mr Duncan and his boss to charges of hypocrisy. Mr Duncan sends his children to school in Virginia, and Mr Obama pays for his two daughters to go to Sidwell Friends.

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But the bigger reason to be pessimistic about Mr Duncan is that the education establishment has an astonishing record of neutralising reform-minded politicians. Entrenched vested interests and a decentralised system—with much of the day-to-day decision-making controlled by 16,000 school districts—combine to squash most promises of improvement. The mighty teachers’ unions regularly welcome reforms in theory while destroying them in practice. Bill Bennett, Ronald Reagan’s education secretary, perfectly described this slippery bunch as “the blob”.

The battle between Mr Duncan and the blob is a crucial one. The result of the battle will determine, first, whether it is worth continuing with moderate education reforms—for if these reforms cannot succeed with \$100 billion and a golden boy at the helm, they never will. It will also determine whether Mr Obama can deliver on his promise to build the American economy on the rock of well-educated and productive workers rather than the sand of financial speculation. A pity that, however many battles it loses, the blob always seems to win the long war.

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