

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

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PRESS GAGGLE BY
SECRETARY OF EDUCATION ARNE DUNCAN

Aboard Air Force One
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12:06 P.M. EST

MR. EARNEST: Secretary Duncan is just going to provide an overview about the announcements today and answer a couple of questions that you guys have. A lot of the other stuff Gibbs covered in the gaggle today, so we're just going to stick to the policy stuff on Race to the Top.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Any questions?

Q Do you want to just start with questions?

Q Can you give us an overview of --

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Sure. Obviously this is a really big day for us, where the President is going to highlight the pretty dramatic moves that have been made around the country already, obviously before any money has been put out. And we're trying to educate our way to a better economy; we're trying to get dramatically better. And we've seen very significant movement from a number of states. Obviously Wisconsin is considering some very significant movement literally this week.

So it's been wonderful to see states moving in the right direction to challenge the status quo, to push toward the kind of dramatic change the President talked about during the campaign, and to see so much movement before we spent a dollar of this money is very, very encouraging.

Q Has it been a stretch to get the unions to go along with having --

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Everybody is working together and no one in this country is saying the status quo is good enough. Everybody recognizes the dropout rate is unacceptable. Everybody recognizes we

have to dramatically increase not just the percent of high school graduates, but the percent ready to do -- really work at the college level, actually graduate from college. And we're all in this together -- principals, teachers, Department of Education, unions, the business community -- importantly, students themselves. I think the President has challenged all of us to move outside of our comfort zones and to collaborate in some very different ways. And I'm very, very encouraged about the progress so far.

Q The next step is for you to announce the contours of the program, right, the criteria by which states can apply?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Yes.

Q When is that going to happen?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: That's coming soon. We have actually got the draft proposals. We have lots of written comments come back -- literally thousands. Our staff has been staying up literally all night going through all those. We have -- folks who have read every single comment we got. We'll come out soon with a final proposal. And the public feedback, the public comments have been very, very helpful and the final proposal will be much stronger due to that info.

Q No more specific than "soon"? Like within a few weeks or this month or --

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Soon.

Q Melody said that the grants would start in January. Is that correct?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: That's correct. It actually goes out -- the applications will be due back after 60 days, and then we'll put money out -- the first tranche of money will be in April, the second one will be in September.

Q So if I'm a school I should plan on doing an application when? Next week?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Soon.

Q We're going to Wisconsin the day before the lawmakers are voting. Does this send a message that the direction they're taking is the direction you want other states to go?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Absolutely. And we've seen, again, probably at least a dozen states already move. I don't know if you guys saw, late last night California -- this bill passed the Senate, their

bill. It's moving on to the House. And so the state of Wisconsin is absolutely moving in the right direction and Governor Doyle is showing real courage. And we're encouraged to know that this is going -- will be voted on this week and it could be a very significant step in the right direction.

Q What percent of American high school -- what's the percent of high school graduates in the U.S. overall?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: I'll flip it the other way. We have about a 30-percent dropout rate, and that 30 percent equates to 1.2 million students not graduating.

Q And is it getting worse or holding its own or what's the trend?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: It's stubbornly high. It's stubbornly high. And so we have to try and over time significantly reduce the dropout rate, we have to significantly increase the graduation rate, and we have to make sure a much higher percentage of those that graduate from high school are prepared for success either in higher education or the world of work.

Q And do you know what the graduation rate is -- like 83 percent graduate, 93?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: It's lower -- well, again, it's a 30 percent dropout rate. This is complicated because it's numbers -- but we're losing far too many of our students to the streets in this country. And I would say that high school -- why we feel such a huge sense of urgency, high school dropouts today are basically condemned to poverty and social failure. There are no good jobs out there, and there was a time in this country -- you go back 30 years -- where there really was an acceptable dropout rate. It was really okay. Like, Chicago, where we're from, you could drop out and go get a job in the stockyards or the steel mills, and get a decent salary and own your own home and support a family. Those jobs, as we know, are just a memory from a bygone era.

And the President is really drawing a line in the sand. The President is saying, by the year 2020 we have to again lead the world in the percent of college graduates. We used to lead the world in percent of college graduates. We have flat-lined for the past two and half decades. Lots of other countries have passed us by, and we're paying that price.

And so every move we make -- I know we're talking about Race to the Top -- early childhood, K-12, higher ed reform -- every move we make is towards that President's long-term goal of significantly

increasing -- again, leading the world in percent of college graduates.

Q And what is the percentage of college graduates on that world scale now?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: We're down -- there are at least nine or 10 countries ahead of us, and we used to lead the world. So it's not so much we dropped -- we flat-lined and they've all passed us by. They've all invested, they've all done more, and we've lost our way educationally. This is about fundamentally saying the only way we're going to strengthen the economy long term, the only way we give every child or student a chance to be successful is to have them be well educated.

Q Secretary Duncan, can you articulate why it's important to link student achievement data with teacher performance, and also why it's important to lift these caps on the charter schools?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: I'll take one at a time. On the first one -- it's amazing, I always use the California example because California is a big state -- California has 300,000 teachers -- 300,000 teachers. The top 10 percent, the top 30,000 teachers in California, would be world-class, would be among the best teachers in the world. The bottom 10 percent in California, the bottom 30,000, probably need to find another line of work, another profession. And nobody can tell you of those 300,000 teachers who's in what category. There's no recognition.

And so what I fundamentally believe is that great teaching matters and we need to be able to identify those teachers who routinely are making an extraordinary difference in students' lives. And to say that teaching has no impact on student performance, on student achievement, just absolutely makes no sense to me. It absolutely degrades the profession.

So the counterargument -- so right now as a country basically zero percent of student achievement relates to teacher evaluation. I think that's a problem. I also think 100 percent -- if all you do is look at a test score to evaluate a teacher, I think that's a problem. So zero is a problem; 100 is a problem. As a country, we're here, we're trying to move to a middle point where you would evaluate teachers on multiple measures -- that's really important -- not just on a single test score, but, yes, student achievement would be a part of what you look at in evaluating a teacher.

And so whether it's an individual teacher, whether it's a school, whether it's a school district, whether it's a state, the whole thing as a country we need to do is we need to accelerate the rate of change. We have to get better faster. And there are

teachers every single year -- just to give you an illustration -- there are teachers every single year where the average child in their class is gaining two years of growth -- two years of growth per year of instruction. That is herculean work. Those teachers are the unsung heroes in our society. And nobody can tell you who those teachers are.

There are some schools that do that, not just one miraculous teacher or one miraculous student. There are schools that year after year produce students that are showing extraordinary gains. Shouldn't we know that? Isn't that something valuable? Shouldn't we be learning from them?

And the flip side of it, if you have teachers or schools where students are falling further and further behind each year, I think we need to know that as well. And so we just want to have an open, honest conversation, but at the end of the day, teachers should never be evaluated on a single test score. I want to be absolutely clear there should always be multiple measures. But student achievement has to be a piece of what teachers are evaluated on.

And there's a recent study that came out, The New Teacher Project, that talked about this Widget Effect where 99 percent of teachers were rated as superior. It's not reality.

On your second point, on charter caps, I've been really clear I'm not a fan of charter schools, I'm a fan of good charter schools. And what we need in this country is just more good schools. We need more good elementary, more good middle, more good high schools. No second grader knows whether they're going to a charter school, or a gifted school, or traditional school, or magnet school. They know, does my teacher care about me? Am I safe? Is there high expectations? Does the principal know who I am?

We need more good schools. And where you have -- where you have good charters, we need to replicate them and to learn from them and to grow. Where you have bad charters, we need to close them down and hold them accountable. And so this is not let a thousand flowers bloom, this is trying to take what is being successful and grow.

And what I would say is if something is working, if you reduce -- we talked about the graduation rate, if you're doing something to reduce the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate, would you put a cap on that strategy? Would you ever say that we're going to cap the number of students who can take AP classes this year? We're going to limit the number of kids who take -- we're going to limit the number of kids that graduate? We would never do that.

So if something is working, if that innovation is helping us get better, why would you put an artificial cap on it? So let's let that

innovation flourish, but at the same time actually have a high bar and hold folks accountable.

So I was a big fan of successful charter schools in Chicago when I was a superintendent there, but I also closed three charter schools for academic failure. And you need both. Good charters are a big piece of the answer. Bad charters perpetuate the status quo and we need to challenge that.

Q Can you define "charter school"?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: That's a good question. It's actually broader than charter schools. It's really about schools that are willing to innovate and do some things differently. And again, for all the challenges we face as a country -- the dropout rate is unacceptably high, not enough students prepared for college -- I'm actually very, very optimistic.

We've never had more high performance schools around the country. Many are traditional schools, many are charter schools, many have different levels of autonomy. What we need to do is to scale up what works, and take to scale those things that are working. And I can take you to the toughest inner-city communities, I can take you to the toughest rural communities where you have a special school -- really high -- (inaudible) -- schools, where 95 percent of kids are graduating, and 95 percent of those that graduate are going on to be successful in college. We need to do more of that.

So good charters are a piece of the answer. We need schools that are willing to challenge the status quo and get the kind of outcomes for students that we desperately need.

Q More freedom, more innovative, more willing to take a chance?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: And also that -- and also accountability. I think that that combination of autonomy and accountability is very important. You got to have those two. And it takes visionary leadership. It takes people who believe in every fiber of their body that every child can be successful. It doesn't matter how tough the community, it doesn't matter about race or poverty, every child in that school can be successful. And we've never had more examples of schools like that around the country.

Q And how many charter schools are there in the country about?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: I don't have a hard number for you. We can get you that number.

Q Thousands?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Yes, thousands, thousands. Yes.

Q It's been a year since the President has been elected, and I'm just wondering about your own reflections. Has it been harder than you thought it would be to achieve the goals that you set out in education?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: It's been extraordinary. And I can't believe it's been a year already. Time is flying by. But to see so much movement across so many states so quickly is unbelievably encouraging. And everywhere we go, people -- no one is saying the status quo is good enough. I've met with every governor. I've met with every state school chief. I'm asking one question: Which one of you is satisfied with your graduation rate? Which one thinks your dropout rate is low enough? And the room gets real quiet.

Lots of progress, lots of momentum, but everybody feels a sense of urgency. And to see so much movement in such a short time has been exhilarating, quite frankly. It's been absolutely amazing.

Q We're seeing a lot of economic anxiety. You said very explicitly, this is an economic initiative.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: This says two things to me. Again, I fundamentally think we have to educate our way to a better economy, that there's an economic imperative behind this. As a country, we cannot continue to be successful and lead the world with a 30-percent dropout rate. Can't do it, can't keep jobs here. So that's one thing.

Second, I really -- I've said repeatedly, I think this is a civil rights issue of our generation, that this is really -- the fight for quality education is really a fight for social justice; that when we fail to educate, we as educators, we perpetuate poverty, we perpetuate social failure. So whether you look at this from the standpoint of social justice or whether you look at this from the standpoint of an economic imperative, there is just this huge sense of urgency I feel that we have to get dramatically better, be willing to challenge the status quo, stop doing what doesn't work, innovate, and take to scale those things that are working.

Thanks, guys.

Q Do you know who else called education a civil rights issue?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Say it again?

Q Who else?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: -- "soft bigotry of low expectations."

Q Very good. (Laughter.)

END

12:20 P.M. EST