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The Great School Turnaround

Lauren Camera Education Reporter

Like many of his predecessors, former President Barack Obama campaigned in part on turning around the country's chronically failing schools.

The majority of those schools were concentrated in racially and economically segregated neighborhoods of cities like his hometown of Chicago, where communities face a host of compounding problems, including high rates of unemployment, incarceration, homicide, drug use and gang violence.

Once elected, Obama wasted no time: He tapped fellow Chicagoan Arne Duncan as education secretary. Duncan, who grew up on the South Side of Chicago and whose mother ran an after-school tutoring program for disadvantaged students there, was then head of the city's school system. And he'd already made a name for himself as a reformer by experimenting with various school turn-around interventions – most notably closing schools that were both underperforming and underenrolled.

Together, Obama and Duncan convinced Congress to super charge the School Improvement Grant, a program aimed at overhauling states' worst schools by giving it $3 billion from the economic stimulus. And along with the nearly $4 billion in Race to the Top funding, the two set out to radically improve the country's poorest performing schools – an effort Duncan described as one of the "biggest bets" of the administration.

"We could really move the needle, lift the bottom and change the lives of tens of millions of underserved children," said Duncan at the time.

As one of Obama's longest-serving cabinet heads, Duncan oversaw the program for seven years before stepping down, at which point the federal government had directed more than $7 billion to the School Improvement Grant, and millions more to smaller-scale programs, like My Brother's Keeper and Promise Neighborhoods, aimed at picking off smaller parts of the larger school turnaround effort.

But just one day before the end of Obama's tenure at the White House, the federal government issued a report that showed that despite the intense focus and surge in resources, the majority

of failing schools were hardly any better off.

Using data from nearly 500 schools in 22 states, the report, published Jan. 19 by the Institute of Education Sciences, showed no evidence that the program had significant impacts on math or reading test scores, high school graduation or college enrollment.

The report was a sobering reminder that despite all efforts, little data exists on the most effective strategies and the extent to which states have the capacity to support school turnarounds.

"We've tried this in lots of different forms and called it lots of different things over the decades – reconstitutions, take-overs, renaissance schools," says Andy Smarick, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. "This was just the latest chapter, but it was the biggest and most expensive. And it didn't work."

To be sure, education policy experts on both sides of the aisle acknowledged the report's shortcomings.

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For starters, the study looked at the impact of the school turnaround program only through 2013, when the administration had made only half of its total investment. In addition, the majority of schools it evaluated choose one of the less intrusive turn-around strategies – replacing key leadership staff and teachers – instead of one of the more intense strategies that's been associated with having a greater impact, such as closing the school or turning it into a charter school.

"The SIG study, while certainly not encouraging, was also not definitive in showing no positive effects," says Martin West, associate professor of education at Harvard's Gradate School of

Education and former education adviser to Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn. "Though for a program that received as much resources and attention as it did, it's disappointing not to be able to provide a clearer evidence of positive impact."

Besides, many point out, graduation rates are up, drop-out rates are down, and some states and school districts, like Tennessee and the District of Columbia, are showing dramatic improvements.

Nevertheless, the Trump administration and new Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, are pointing to the study as definitive evidence that the status quo needs to go. And like administrations past, the president is renewing calls to fix the education system, calling education the "civil rights issue of our time," and pledging to help students trapped in poor performing schools – especially those in crime-ridden cities like Chicago.

"We cannot rely on throwing money at this problem like administrations past," DeVos recently wrote in an op-ed for USA Today. "Instead, we need to enact serious, substantive reforms that go to the source of the problem."

But enacting such reforms will be a tough sell to a Congress that recently cleared the largest rewrite of the federal K-12 education law in more than a decade – one that hands over much of the decision-making authority for things like turning around schools to states themselves.

Moreover, there's little to no appetite from the leadership of the Republican-controlled House and Senate to create new federal spending.

"One of the interesting things is that because of the Every Student Succeeds Act, any administration, a Trump administration or a Clinton administration, would have entered office with less of an ability to influence how states address the problem of persistently low-performing schools than the Obama administration had," West says.

Trump and DeVos instead have latched on to a states' rights narrative in the infancy of the administration – a strategy that runs counter to the tack the previous administration took and one that's the basis for the newcomers' intense focus on school choice as a solution to the problem.

"The Duncan-Obama way of doing it – which is the traditional way of doing it – is to assume that today's schools and today's districts are going to assign today's kids to schools," Smarick explains. "If you assume all that then you have to spend all your money trying to fix failing schools."

He continues: "The DeVos mindset doesn't assume that. Her mindset is, 'We have kids assigned to failing schools, how do we help those kids.'"

The answer to that question, at least so far since Trump and DeVos have yet to outline specific policy proposals, seems to be through school choice. And right at this moment, states are developing their individual school turn-around plans under the new education law, providing what some see as an opportunity to change course from traditional turnaround strategies and begin incorporating school choice policy.

"States under their ESSA plans have a new opportunity to try something different and you have a new secretary of education who is saying try school choice instead," says Smarick. "This could be a very interesting moment."

But so far, states and school districts have only used school choice as a small part of the solution, and Harvard's West, for one, isn't convinced it's the answer.

"Any administration's hand's would be tied on this issue," says West. "And any administration would need to rely on the bully pulpit above all. And that's certainly what you've seen so far, and so far it's been a focus on high-level rhetoric about underperformance as opposed to steps that could be taken to address the problem."

Many remain skeptical of any school choice plan that includes vouchers, a scholarship tax credit or making federal Title I funding portable for poor students and those with disabilities. Indeed, a slate of studies recently published on the effectiveness of voucher programs in Florida, Indiana, Louisiana and Ohio – the largest voucher programs in the country – do much to discredit their effectiveness.

Even still, watching how Trump and DeVos go about acting on their promises to to overhaul the financially bloated and beleaguered education system, most underscore the sea change in focus from fixing the failing schools to helping the students in the failing schools.

"I don't think the Trump administration's preferred approach is to fix failing schools as much as they want to help students in failing schools," says Melissa Tooley, education policy expert at New America. "These are two different sides of the same coin."

Tags: education policy, K-12 education, Betsy DeVos, Donald Trump, Arne Duncan, Barack Obama

Lauren Camera is an education reporter at U.S. News & World Report. She's covered education policy and politics for nearly a decade and has written for Education Week, The Hechinger Report, Congressional Quarterly, Roll Call, and the Chronicle of Higher Education. She was a 2013 Spencer Education Fellow at Columbia University's School of Journalism, where she conducted a reporting project about the impact of the Obama administration's competitive education grant, Race to the Top.

From: mailinglist@capitol.hawaii.gov
Sent: Saturday, March 18, 2017 1:16 PM
To: EDU Testimony
Cc: mendezj@hawaii.edu
Subject: *Submitted testimony for SR85 on Mar 24, 2017 14:45PM*

SR85
Submitted on: 3/18/2017
Testimony for EDU on Mar 24, 2017 14:45PM in Conference Room 229

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Present at Hearing
Javier Mendez-Alvarez	Individual	Oppose	No

Comments:

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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

RE: SCR 171/SR 85 - REQUESTING THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION TO DEVELOP AND ESTABLISH A LIVE, LEARN, WORK, AND PLAY PROGRAM TO PROMOTE WORKFORCE READINESS IN HAWAII'S STUDENTS THROUGH CAREER PIPELINE AND ACADEMY SCHOOL INITIATIVES

FRIDAY, MARCH 24, 2017

COREY ROSENLEE, PRESIDENT
HAWAII STATE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION

Chair Kidani and Members of the Committee:

The Hawaii State Teachers Association **supports SCR 171/SR 85**, requesting the Department of Education to develop and establish a live, learn, work, and play program to promote workforce readiness in Hawai'i's students through career pipeline and academic school initiatives.

According the Hawaii State Department of Education, "Career and Technical Education is an educational structure that allows students the opportunity to explore and learn through the practical application of academic and technical skills and knowledge. The support and involvement of business and industry in CTE is critical to the preparation of tomorrow's skilled workforce."

Yet, there is concern among CTE stakeholders (teachers, industry experts, and employers) about the lack of CTE inclusion in federal education legislation. As a result of the federal emphasis on high stakes accountability over the past decade, secondary schools across the state have diverted CTE funding to core content areas, especially English Language Arts and mathematics.

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A majority of all current job openings, both locally and nationally, are for positions that do not require a college degree. While education reform rhetoric endlessly extols "college and career readiness," job projections by the Hawai'i Department of Labor show that, overall, more than 72 percent of the state's projected openings through 2022 require a high school diploma or less. For comparison, about 15 percent of future openings require a bachelor's degree and only 4 percent require a master's, doctoral, or professional degree.

Hawai'i's CTE offerings must be expanded, then, to allow young people to design their own futures. According to a national study, only 25 percent of polled job seekers reported receiving career pathing in high school, however, with 41 percent saying that they wished they had received more vocational guidance. Careers taught through the state's CTE program–from automotive technology to environmental management to digital media–are at the cutting edge of our local economy, often STEM-related, and require real-world skills that students and employers desire, and that the CCRI paradigm too often fails to advance. One way of increasing participation in CTE programming is to task the DOE with developing a K-12 career pipeline initiatives, which can advance workforce development by ensuring that the growth of highly-skilled employees is a strategic goal of the department.

To prepare students for the 21st Century workforce, the Hawaii State Teachers Association asks your committee to **support** this bill.