

Tomgram: Will Public Education Be Militarized?

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In two days, we enter a new Bush and Cheney-less era, though we'll be living with their nightmarish legacy forever and a day. In response to change, all of us have to adapt -- TomDispatch included. This site certainly won't lose its focus on the world out there, the ongoing militarization of our country, the way we continue to garrison the planet, or the new military and civilian team of custodians and bureaucrats of empire just now being put in place to manage our ongoing wars. This coming week and next, for instance, the site will turn to the nightmare in Gaza, well covered indeed by the political blogosphere, while considering what, in the new Obama era, the future may hold in the Middle East; but TomDispatch will also (as today) aim to expand its domestic focus, while keeping a steady eye upon the economic devastation now roiling our country and planet. (By the way, on some Saturdays, including the next one, I'll be having a surprise or two for TD readers, so keep your eyes peeled.)

Just as the Bush administration is handing off a host of foreign policy debacles to Barack Obama (including seemingly endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan), a woefully mismanaged economic bailout, and possibly a second Great Depression, so the outgoing president is leaving the new administration with a public education mess. There's the much maligned and underfunded No Child Left Behind Act which is up for reauthorization this year. The cost of going to college is also rapidly spiraling out of control, as evidenced in a recent report in which every state except California received an "F" for college affordability. And at the same time, student loans are drying up as lenders, fearing

economic disaster, scale back their programs.

With this in mind, the stakes are high for the incoming Secretary of Education and Obama pal Arne Duncan, who was received with striking warmth during his Senate confirmation hearings this week. As Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) put it, "Mr. Duncan, there is no question that schools across America can benefit from the same kind of fresh thinking that you brought to Chicago public schools. As you know very well, perhaps our greatest educational challenge is to improve the performance of urban and rural public schools serving high-poverty communities."

Today, Andy Kroll skips the "applause" and the "warm reception." Instead, he puts Duncan's "fresh thinking" in Chicago under the microscope. The results may surprise.

The Duncan Doctrine

The Military-Corporate Legacy of the New Secretary of Education
By Andy Kroll

On December 16th, a friendship forged nearly two decades ago on the hardwood of the basketball court culminated in a press conference at the Dodge Renaissance Academy, an elementary school located on the west side of Chicago. In a glowing introduction to the media, President-elect Barack Obama named Arne Duncan, the chief executive officer of the Chicago Public Schools system (CPS), as his nominee for U.S. Secretary of Education. "When it comes to school reform," the President-elect said, "Arne is the most hands-on of hands-on practitioners. For Arne, school reform isn't just a theory in a book -- it's the cause of his life. And the

results aren't just about test scores or statistics, but about whether our children are developing the skills they need to compete with any worker in the world for any job."

Though the announcement came amidst a deluge of other Obama nominations -- he had unveiled key members of his energy and environment teams the day before and would add his picks for the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior the next day -- Duncan's selection was eagerly anticipated, and garnered mostly favorable reactions in education circles and in the media. He was described as *the* compromise candidate between powerful teachers' unions and the advocates of charter schools and merit pay. He was also regularly hailed as a "reformer," fearless when it came to challenging the educational *status quo* and more than willing to shake up hidebound, moribund public school systems.

Yet a closer investigation of Duncan's record in Chicago casts doubt on that label. As he packs up for Washington, Duncan leaves behind a Windy City legacy that's hardly cause for optimism, emphasizing as it does a business-minded, market-driven model for education. If he is a "reformer," his style of management is distinctly top-down, corporate, and privatizing. It views teachers as expendable, unions as unnecessary, and students as customers.

Disturbing as well is the prominence of Duncan's belief in offering a key role in public education to the military. **Chicago's school system is currently the most militarized in the country, boasting five military academies, nearly three dozen smaller Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps programs within existing high schools, and numerous middle school Junior ROTC programs. More troubling yet, the military academies he's started are nearly all located in low-income, minority neighborhoods.** This merging of military training and education naturally raises concerns about whether such

academies will be not just education centers, but recruitment centers as well.

Rather than handing Duncan a free pass on his way into office, as lawmakers did during Duncan's breezy confirmation hearings last week, a closer examination of the Chicago native's record is in order. Only then can we begin to imagine where public education might be heading under Arne Duncan, and whether his vision represents the kind of "change" that will bring our students meaningfully in line with the rest of the world.

The Militarization of Secondary Education

Today, **the flagship projects in CPS's militarization are its five military academies, affiliated with either [sic] the Army, Navy, or Marines. All students -- or cadets, as they're known -- attending one of these schools are required to enroll as well in the academy's Junior ROTC program. That means cadets must wear full military uniforms to school everyday, and undergo daily uniform inspections. As part of the academy's curriculum, they must also take a daily ROTC course focusing on military history, map reading and navigation, drug prevention, and the branches of the Department of Defense.**

Cadets can practice marching on an academy's drill team, learn the proper way to fire a weapon on the rifle team, and choose to attend extracurricular spring or summer military training sessions. **At the Phoenix Military Academy, cadets are even organized into an academy battalion, modeled on an Army infantry division battalion, in which upper-class cadets fill the leading roles of commander, executive officer, and sergeant major.**

In addition, **military personnel from the U.S. armed services teach alongside regular teachers in each academy, and also fill administrative roles such as academy "commandants." Three of these military academies were created in part with Department of Defense ap-**

appropriations -- funds secured by Illinois lawmakers -- and when the proposed Air Force Academy High School opens this fall, CPS will be the only public school system in the country with Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps high school academies.

CPS also boasts almost three dozen smaller Junior ROTC programs within existing high schools that students can opt to join, and over 20 voluntary middle school Junior ROTC programs. All told, between the academies and the voluntary Junior ROTC programs, more than 10,000 students are enrolled in a military education program of some sort in the CPS system. Officials like Duncan and Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley justify the need for the military academies by claiming they do a superlative job teaching students discipline and providing them with character-building opportunities. "These are positive learning environments," Duncan said in 2007. "I love the sense of leadership. I love the sense of discipline."

Without a doubt, teaching students about discipline and leadership is an important aspect of being an educator. But is the full-scale uniformed culture of the military actually necessary to impart these values? A student who learns to play the cello, who studies how to read music, will learn discipline too, without a military-themed learning environment. In addition, encouraging students to be critical thinkers, to question accepted beliefs and norms, remains key to a teacher's role at any grade level. The military's culture of uniformity and discipline, important as it may be for an army, hardly aligns with these pedagogical values.

Of no less concern are the types of students Chicago's military academies are trying to attract. **All of CPS's military academies (except the Rickover Naval Academy) are located in low-income neighborhoods with primarily black and/or Hispanic residents. As a result, student enrollment in the academies**

consists almost entirely of minorities. Whites, who already represent a mere 9% of the students in the Chicago system, make up only 4% of the students enrolled in the military academies.

There is obviously a correlation between these low-income, minority communities, the military academies being established in them, and the long-term recruitment needs of the U.S. military. The schools essentially function as recruiting tools, despite the expectable military disclaimers. The *Chicago Tribune* typically reported in 1999 that the creation of the system's first military school in the historically black community of Bronzeville grew, in part, out of "a desire for the military to increase the pool of minority candidates for its academies." And before the House Armed Services Committee in 2000, the armed services chiefs of staff testified that 30%-50% of all Junior ROTC cadets later enlist in the military. Organizations opposing the military's growing presence in public schools insist that it's no mistake the number of military academies in Chicago is on the rise at a time when the U.S. military has had difficulty meeting its recruitment targets while fighting two unpopular wars.

It seems clear enough that, when it comes to the militarization of the Chicago school system, whatever Duncan's goals, the results are likely to be only partly "educational."

Merging the Market and the Classroom

While discussing his nomination, President-elect Obama praised the fact that Duncan isn't " beholden to any one ideology." A closer examination of his career in education, however, suggests otherwise. As Chicago's chief executive officer (not to be confused with CPS's chief *education* officer), Duncan ran his district in a most businesslike manner. As he put it in a 2003 profile in *Catalyst Chicago*, an independent magazine that covers education reform, "We're in the business of education." And indeed, managing the country's

third-largest school system *does* require sharp business acumen. But what's evident from Duncan's seven years in charge is his belief that the business of education should, first and foremost, embrace the logic of the free market and privatization.

Duncan's belief in privatizing public education can be most clearly seen in Chicago's Renaissance 2010 plan, the centerpiece of his time in that city. Designed by corporate consulting firm A.T. Kearney and backed by the Commercial Club of Chicago, an organization representing some of the city's largest businesses, Renaissance 2010 has pushed hard for the closing of underperforming schools -- to be replaced by multiple new, smaller, "entrepreneurial" schools. Under the plan, many of the new institutions established have been privatized charter or "contract" schools run by independent nonprofit outfits. They, then, turn out to have the option of contracting school management out to for-profit education management organizations. In addition, **Renaissance 2010 charter schools, not being subject to state laws and district initiatives, can -- as many have -- eliminate the teachers' union altogether.**

Under Duncan's leadership, CPS and Renaissance 2010 schools have adopted a performance-driven style of governance in which well-run schools and their teachers and administrators are rewarded, and low-performing schools are penalized. As *Catalyst Chicago* reported, "Star schools and principals have been granted more flexibility and autonomy, and often financial freedom and bonus pay." Low-performing schools put on probation, on the other hand, "have little say over how they can spend poverty funding, an area otherwise controlled by elected local school councils... [Local school councils] at struggling schools have also lost the right to hire or fire principals -- restrictions that have outraged some parent activists."

Students as well as teachers and principals are experiencing firsthand the im-

pact of Duncan's belief in competition and incentive-based learning. This fall, the Chicago Public Schools rolled out a Green for Grade\$ program in which the district will pay freshmen at 20 selected high schools for good grades -- \$50 in cash for an A, \$35 for a B, and even \$20 for a C. Though students not surprisingly say they support the program -- what student wouldn't want to get paid for grades? -- critics contend that cash-for-grades incentives, which stir interest in learning for all the wrong reasons, turn being educated into a job.

Duncan's rhetoric offers a good sense of what his business-minded approach and support for bringing free-market ideologies into public education means. At a May 2008 symposium hosted by the Renaissance Schools Fund, the nonprofit financial arm of Renaissance 2010, entitled "Free to Choose, Free to Succeed: The New Market of Public Education," Duncan typically compared his job running a school district to that of a stock portfolio manager. As he explained, "I am not a manager of 600 schools. I'm a portfolio manager of 600 schools and I'm trying to improve the portfolio." He would later add, "We're trying to blur the lines between the public and the private."

A Top-Down Leadership Style

Barack Obama built his campaign on impressive grassroots support and the democratic nature of his candidacy. Judging by his continued outreach to supporters, he seems intent on leading, at least in part, with the same bottom-up style. Duncan's style couldn't be more different.

Under Duncan, the critical voices of parents, community leaders, students, and teachers regularly fell on deaf ears. As described by University of Illinois at Chicago professor and education activist Pauline Lipman in the journal *Educational Policy* in 2007, Renaissance 2010 provoked striking resistance within affected communities and neighborhoods. There were heated community hearings and similarly angry testimony at Board of Education meetings, as

well as door-to-door organizing, picketing, and even, at one point, a student walk-out.

"The opposition," Lipman wrote, "brought together unions, teachers, students, school reformers, community leaders and organizations, parents in African American South and West Side communities, and some Latino community activists and teachers." Yet, as she pointed out recently, mounting neighborhood opposition had little effect. "I'm pretty in tune with the grassroots activism in education in Chicago," she said, "and people are uniformly opposed to these policies, and uniformly feel that they have no voice."

During Duncan's tenure, decision-making responsibilities that once belonged to elected officials shifted into the hands of unelected individuals handpicked by the city's corporate or political elite. For instance, elected local school councils, made up mostly of parents and community leaders, are to be scaled back or eliminated altogether as part of Renaissance 2010. Now, many new schools can simply opt out of such councils.

Then there's the Renaissance Schools Fund. It oversees the selection and evaluation of new schools and subsequent investment in them. Made up of unelected business leaders, the CEO of the system, and the Chicago Board of Education president, the Fund takes the money it raises and makes schools compete against each other for limited private funding. It has typically been criticized by community leaders and activists for being an opaque, unaccountable body indifferent to the will of Chicago's citizens.

Making the grade?

Despite his controversial educational policies, Duncan's supporters ultimately contend that, as the CEO of Chicago's schools, he's gotten results where it matters -- test scores. An objective, easily quantifiable yet imperfect measure of student learning, test scores have indeed improved in several areas under Duncan

(though many attribute this to lowered statewide testing standards and more lenient testing guidelines). Between 2001 and 2008, for instance, the percentage of elementary school students meeting or exceeding standards on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test increased from 39.5% to 65%. The number of CPS students meeting or exceeding the Illinois Learning Standards, another statewide secondary education achievement assessment, also increased from 38% in 2002 to 60% in 2008.

When measured on a national scale, however, Duncan's record looks a lot less impressive. In comparison to other major urban school districts (including Los Angeles, Boston, New York City, and Washington, D.C.) in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or "The Nation's Report Card," Chicago fourth and eighth graders ranked, with only one exception, in the bottom half of all districts in math, reading, and science in 2003, 2005 and 2007. In addition, from 2004 to 2008, the Chicago Public Schools district failed to make "adequate yearly progress" as mandated by the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act.

Even if Duncan's policies do continue to boost test scores in coming years, the question must be asked: At whose expense? In a competition-driven educational system, some schools will, of course, succeed, receiving more funding and so hiring the most talented teachers. At the same time, schools that aren't "performing" will be put on probation, stripped of their autonomy, and possibly closed, only to be reopened as privately-run outfits -- or even handed over to the military. The highest achieving students (that is, the best test-takers) will have access to the most up-to-date facilities, advanced equipment, and academic support programs; struggling students will likely be left behind, separate and unequal, stuck in decrepit classrooms and underfunded schools.

Public education is not meant to be a win-lose, us-versus-them system, nor is it

meant to be a recruitment system for the military -- and yet this, it seems, is at the heart of Duncan's legacy in Chicago, and so a reasonable indication of the kind of

"reform" he's likely to bring to the country as education secretary.
(emphases added)

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