

Education help greatly needed

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BY **DAVID S. BRODER**

Today, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan will announce the first-round winners of the Race to the Top, the \$4 billion competition he set up to reward the states with the most ambitious plans for improving their public schools.

When I asked Duncan last week what he hoped people would say about this contest, he responded: "So many were skeptical when we announced this a year ago as part of the stimulus package. I hope they realize now that a very high bar has been set."

Because the winning plans are so good? I asked. "So good, and so few," he said.

Duncan, the rangy former Chicago schools chief who plays pickup basketball with the president, has been given what none of his predecessors in the Education Department ever had: a huge chunk of cash, borrowed from abroad as part of the two-year, \$787 billion effort to rescue the economy from collapse. Fifteen of the 40 states that submitted plans were named as finalists in the Race to the Top earlier this month, along with the District of Columbia. The winners will pick up millions for their improvement projects.

That this is happening when state after state and school district after school district have seen their regular budgets slashed by the recession-crippling domestic economy simply increases Duncan's leverage.

We know he will use it to increase the role of charter schools, the customized public alternative to the failing conventional models, and to spur efforts to change the way that teachers are recruited, trained and deployed — especially for youngsters from households with meager finances.

But we don't know where. And we don't know how successfully Duncan can exploit this windfall to move the bureaucracy of education in ways that produce dramatic results.

As it happens, Race to the Top is just one of two major initiatives Duncan has launched to try to change the face of America's public schools. The other is the effort to rewrite and reauthorize in Congress the largest federal aid to education act, now best known by the name George W. Bush gave



it, No Child Left Behind.

Duncan wants to preserve what is most distinctive (and controversial) about that law, the insistence that elementary and high schools test their pupils regularly to determine how every significant subgroup is doing, with the aim of reducing racial and gender gaps.

But he and the president have urged Congress to rewrite both the standards and their implementation in a variety of ways that promise to be more rigorous but less intrusive than NCLB.

They are helped by the fact that 48 of the 50 states — all but Texas and Alaska — have agreed this year to write a set of common standards for math and English studies, providing a benchmark for schools without invoking the heavy hand of Washington.

It's too soon to know what Congress will do with the Duncan plan or even whether NCLB reauthorization will fit onto the legislative calendar.

So far, the most critical comments have come from the heads of the two big teachers unions, which could doom these changes in a Democratic Congress. But Duncan, after his experience in Chicago, has learned the value of keeping the lines of communication open and not accepting the first “no” as final. The day I saw him, he'd had breakfast with one of the union chiefs.

More remarkably, the bipartisanship that marked the passage of NCLB — with Democrats George Miller of California and Ted Kennedy partnering with Bush — remains possible even after the war over health care.

Duncan credits Republican Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, a former secretary of education now in the Senate, and Rep. Mike Castle of Delaware, another Republican, as helping shape the proposal.

Achieving the kind of change Duncan is promoting would be a great gift for the country, especially when so many states are being forced by budgetary pressures to skimp on education.

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