



EDUCATOR COMPENSATION INSTITUTE

P.O. Box 481, Plymouth, Wisconsin 53073-0481
(920) 980-0344

Editorial

Obama's Secretary of Education

Whomever the new Secretary, he/she will orchestrate profound change. The types of reforms and the reformers at the table, however, will depend on who the President-Elect selects.

Last July, Candidate Obama spoke to a crowd of 9,000 members of the National Education Association about educational reform, including the sensitive and controversial subject of merit pay. Understanding that generating effective and sustainable educational reforms will require the participation of the very people who will ultimately implement those reforms, Senator Obama said, "I want to work with teachers. I'm not going to do it to you; I'm going to do it with you."

The candidate's understanding of the importance of practitioner involvement in the creation and implementation of progressive educational reforms marked a pleasant departure from the bureaucratic punditry that dropped a dysfunctional No Child Left Behind onto the laps of American teachers.

Now that the Candidate has become the President-Elect, it's time to begin the process of examining and generating the types of positive educational reforms that our schools need. That process begins with the important selection of a Secretary of Education, a decision that is now generating a growing debate among Democrats.

Two separate crowds with significant differences appear to be emerging in this national debate. The first crowd, and the one with which I hang, embraces the wisdom of the candidate's promise to work with teachers in generating effective and sustainable educational reforms. It's invigorating to imagine a Department of Education that actually relies on the advice and counsel of those who know the most about educating kids when considering reforms about educating kids.

The second crowd, led by the likes of Andrew Rotherham (Democrats for Education Reform), Seyward Darby (New Republic), and the folks at Teach for American, appears to view the Nation's teachers and their unions as blocks to any successful attempts at school reform. This crowd asserts that "true" reformers exist only among their ilk, not among American educators.

The first crowd is looking for a Secretary of Education who embraces the type of philosophy of inclusiveness, skill sets, and ideas embodied in someone like

Linda Darling-Hammond, the Stanford University professor who is currently heading up Obama's education policy transition group.

The second crowd is looking to someone like Washington schools chief Michelle Rhee who is currently embroiled in a battle with the teachers union over tenure.

My crowd would welcome an educator who can unite people in the spirit of President Obama's campaign themes and toward the realization of his goals.

The Rotherham/Darby/TFA crowd would prefer New York schools chancellor Joel Klein or any number of educational bureaucrats who seek to convince the American citizenry that the success of a school can be accurately measured by a single standardized test.

My crowd of reformers recognizes that more standardized tests will not produce kids better equipped to prosper and succeed in the 21st Century. We understand that an overemphasis on the memorization of facts will not generate the kinds of creative leaders and problem solvers our next generation so desperately needs. We know that the most effective and knowledgeable education reformers are not bureaucrats, they are educators.

Whomever the selection, I am confident the new Secretary will embrace the philosophical tenets of the candidate from last summer. I'm confident that President Obama's selection will recognize that Democrats for Education Reform and the New Republic are not the sole purveyors of reform. And, I'm confident the next Secretary will embrace the wisdom and experience of the educators and administrators working in our schools every day as the critical work of improving our Nation's education system begins.

Jim Carlson
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