

Ready, set, go

Barack Obama's schools chief tries to incite dramatic reform that will last.



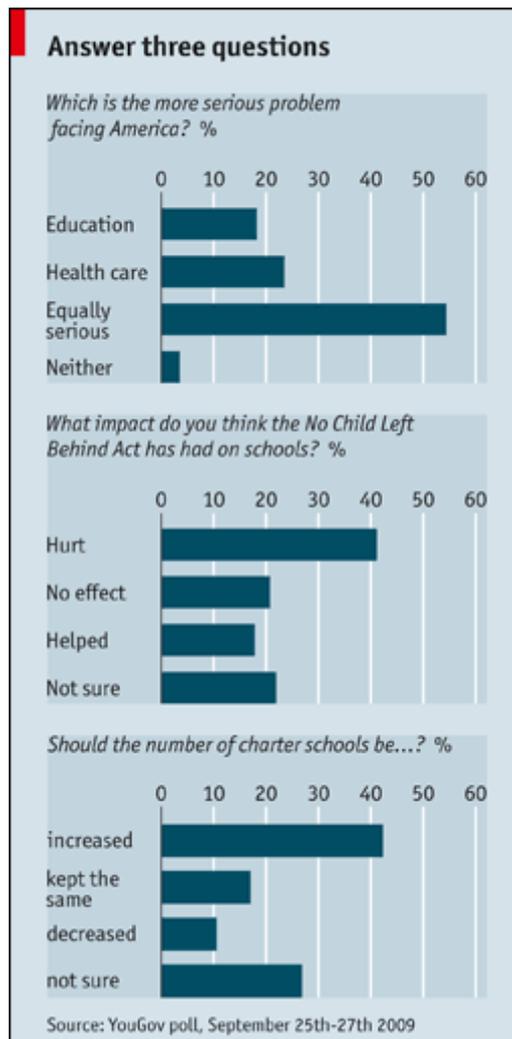
Sandra Steinbrecher

Between classes at Fenger High School, on the far South Side of Chicago, hundreds of students churn through the halls. Elizabeth Dozier, the new principal, keeps a watchful eye. "Let's go, gentlemen!" she shouts. "Let's go to class!" Ms Dozier wears a two-way radio to deal with problems the minute they arise. One is small: the girls' toilets have no paper towels. One is bigger: there's a brawl upstairs. It's not to be ignored: on September 24th an honour-roll student was beaten to death near Fenger, swept up in senseless violence.

For an idea of the task confronting Arne Duncan, Barack Obama's education secretary, Fenger is a good place to start. The school lies closer to Indiana's mills than Chicago's Magnificent Mile. From 2006 to 2008 fewer than 3% of pupils met Illinois's meagre standards of achievement. But this year everything is supposed to change. The Chicago school district chose Fenger as a "turnaround". Old teachers have been sacked and new programmes put in place. Fenger faces formidable odds. But if Mr Duncan has his way, the school's transformation will be the start of a larger shift.

Mr Duncan, the former chief of Chicago's schools, finds himself in an unprecedented position. No education secretary has ever had so much money to drive reform. Thanks largely to the federal stimulus, he has more than \$10 billion, including \$3.5 billion to turn around schools. More than \$4 billion will go to states that pursue specific initiatives: final guidelines for applications will be issued this autumn, and states are scurrying to prepare. Mr Duncan calls the money a "moon shot"—for his department and for the country.

There is appetite for reform. Almost three-quarters of Americans think that the problems facing education are at least as grave as those facing health care, according to a poll conducted for The Economist by YouGov (see chart). George Bush's education law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), attempted to set standards and hold schools accountable for meeting them. But 61% think that NCLB has had no effect or has actually hurt America's schools. The act is overdue for reauthorisation, and on September 24th Mr Duncan described possible changes to it. In the meantime, however, he and Mr Obama are using stimulus cash to pursue goals of their own.



Traditionally, the education secretary can do little to push reform. Mr Duncan has described his department as a “compliance machine”. Most of the stimulus’s \$100 billion for education has gone simply to fill budget gaps and prevent lay-offs. But with his \$10 billion Mr Duncan says he wants to “fundamentally change the business the department of education is in.” Joe Williams of Democrats for Education Reform, an advocacy group, calls him a “venture philanthropist”.

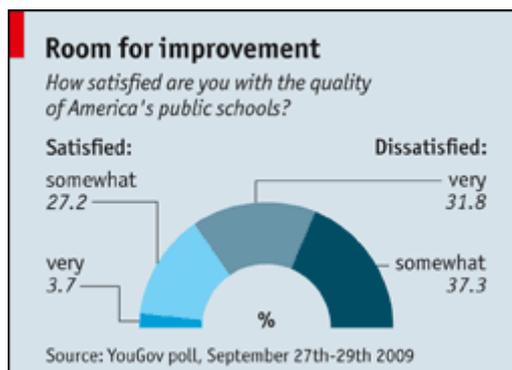
The education department has divided the cash into several programmes, including a \$650m “Investing in Innovation” fund that will award grants not only to school districts but to private groups that run schools. The biggest pot of money is the \$4.4 billion Race to the Top, which will reward states for reform in four areas. First, it will support internationally benchmarked standards and tests, an effort to reverse the tendency of states to weaken standards under NCLB. Second, Race to the Top will streamline the collection of pupil data and use it to improve teaching. Third, the fund will encourage states to use performance to determine training and, controversially, pay and promotion. Fourth, the fund will support efforts to help struggling schools. A state may not apply if it forbids the use of pupil data to evaluate teachers. States will be at a disadvantage if they place limits on charter schools (publicly funded schools that operate without traditional regulations). Mr Duncan is especially interested in proposals to lengthen the school day and year.

Even more ambitious, Mr Duncan is directing \$3.5 billion to turn around the country’s 5,000 worst schools within five years. NCLB was supposed to help bad schools improve, but most states pursued superficial reform. Now Mr Duncan is offering four stringent options: replace the principal and at least half the staff; reopen the school under the management of a private

group; close the school and enroll students elsewhere; or make sweeping changes such as extending the school day and giving principals more autonomy.

"The goals are terrific," says Randi Weingarten, leader of the American Federation of Teachers. But she quickly adds that reform by "administrative fiat" is doomed—not least because her huge union may often obstruct it. "This has nothing to do with my authority," Mr Duncan insists. "This is all to do with the opportunity that states have."

Indeed, much depends on how states—and unions, superintendents and teachers—respond. Some states have rushed to qualify for Race to the Top by raising caps on charter schools. California's governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, wants the legislature to pass sweeping reforms to make his state a better candidate for federal grants.



But despite Mr Duncan's bully pulpit, some may refuse to be bullied. Ten states still ban charter schools. Mr Duncan's department must live up to its own standards, awarding grants only to states with impressive applications. Even then, Andy Smarick of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative think-tank, worries that states may promise ambitious reform, then implement it lazily. Ms Weingarten says that unless Race to the Top becomes less prescriptive, there will be fights at local level. Some of Mr Duncan's initiatives would require changing union contracts. That means trouble.

Most daunting, however, is the task of turning around failing schools. It may be difficult to find sufficient manpower to do this. Charter groups usually prefer to start new schools, rather than improve existing ones burdened by bad habits and union rules. Talented teachers are hard to recruit and keep. Fenger provides tragic proof that violence can slow progress, though Ms Dozier is charging ahead with her reforms. And despite some success stories, there is still debate on which changes work. In most places, including Mr Duncan's Chicago, results are mixed or reforms are too new to judge their success, explains Tim Knowles, director of the Urban Education Institute at the University of Chicago.

"Implementation...is where reform dies," warns Ms Weingarten. As Fenger began the school year, it was still decked with banners advertising a previous, failed programme. Mr Duncan says that this time, change will be different—more comprehensive and more enduring. "The goal is to drive the kind of reform over the next couple of years that will last for the next couple of decades." He has dangled the carrot. It is up to the country to bite.

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