

Built for Teachers

How the *Blueprint for Reform*
Empowers Educators



U. S. D E P A R T M E N T O F E D U C A T I O N

U.S. Department of Education

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August 2010

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Dear Teaching Colleague:

This is a tough time to be a teacher. You went into teaching with a great heart and a great passion because you want to make a difference. You work tirelessly—nights, weekends, summers—to plan lessons, grade papers, serve on committees, attend meetings, coach sports, and perform other duties “as assigned,” but too often this work goes unrecognized. You spend your own money on your classrooms and students, and many of your salaries are frozen or cut in tough economic times. I have no doubt that you get dizzy juggling the barrage of mandates in federal, state, district, and school programs, many of which must feel as though they disappear as quickly as they emerge.

In recent years, the federal government hasn’t helped solve problems for teachers. The *No Child Left Behind Act* created incentives for states to lower standards and measure students’ skills by using low-quality “bubble tests.” The law focused on punitive measures when students didn’t reach an absolute standard, yet failed to acknowledge growth.

As I’ve travelled the country, I’ve met with thousands of teachers, and I’ve heard their fears and concerns. Teachers are asking: *Are these reforms the Next Big Thing, here today but gone tomorrow? Will they focus on testing in a way that further narrows the curriculum and denies students the great education that we seek to bring? Could we lose our jobs if our students’ scores aren’t high enough?*

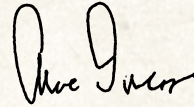
In President Obama’s *Blueprint for Reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* we are addressing those concerns and proposing common-sense strategies to move us in the right direction. Many of you have expressed great relief that the *Blueprint* will fix *No Child Left Behind*. And teachers have been telling me that they are encouraged, and even energized, by President Obama’s vision.

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This brochure provides a summary of some of the reasons that teachers I've met tell me they support the president's *Blueprint*. After reviewing this, I invite you to read the *Blueprint* and work within your schools and states to support reform in our nation's public schools. With teachers, parents, and schools working together, I'm so encouraged by what's possible.

Thank you for all you do to support our schools, families, and communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Arne Duncan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Arne" and last name "Duncan" clearly distinguishable.

Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education

How the *Blueprint for Reform* Empowers Educators

The *Blueprint for Reform* is designed to meet the needs of students while accomplishing objectives that teachers have been concerned about for a long time.

Respecting Teachers as the Professionals They Are

***Our Challenge:** We all know that not all teachers are alike, nor should they be. Yet, for too long, many educators have been treated like cogs in the system, interchangeably generic employees whose strengths and contributions go largely unnoticed. Unlike evaluations in other professions, teacher performance reviews don't provide meaningful feedback, and they have little to no impact on your professional development. Furthermore, the most effective teachers are generally not rewarded for doing a great job or for taking on greater responsibilities.*

The *Blueprint's* New Direction:

Recognizing the Importance of Teachers. The *Blueprint* is based on two principles that we all know are true: 1) Great teachers matter; and 2) Not all teachers are equally effective. Under this plan, teachers are recognized and supported as unique professionals. Principals and other school leaders will take the time (and they should be given the training) to evaluate teachers comprehensively and fairly based on individual performance. The plan proposes that evaluations be based on multiple measures, acknowledge successes, provide meaningful feedback, inform staff development and staffing decisions, offer teachers more responsibility, and compensate them more reasonably. Teachers deserve to be evaluated fairly and paid for the hard work they do.



Broadening the Curriculum

Our Challenge: No Child Left Behind's *focus on Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)* has put history, the arts, and other critical subjects on the back burner. Schools spend far too much time on tests and not enough on lessons that foster engagement, critical thinking, and a well-rounded education.

The Blueprint's New Direction:

Better Assessments. The Department is investing \$350 million in support for states to develop better assessments that measure complex skills, ensuring that students are gaining the knowledge and skills they need in the real world—not just filling in bubbles. New assessments may include performance items, such as portfolios and projects. States are encouraged to work with a coalition of state colleges and universities to create standards that are fair and to ensure that students who meet them have the skills to succeed in college and careers.

Painting With a Broad Brush. The effect of the *Blueprint* will be to broaden what teachers teach, not limit it. Because most schools will have relief from the relentless emphasis on year-to-year test scores, teachers and principals will be able to focus on ensuring a high-quality education for every student, including long-neglected subjects like art and foreign languages. The *Blueprint* also will provide funding to support high-quality instruction in these subjects, especially in our highest-need schools. Finally, because states will have the flexibility to include a range of academic subjects in their accountability systems, teachers of these subjects will no longer feel ignored.



Using Data the Right Way

Our Challenge: *Teachers can speak for hours about the misuse of testing data: requiring all students to be on the same level all at once, labeling schools and teachers as failures even if scores are growing, using scores as the sole measurement of success, and teaching to the test.*

The Blueprint's New Direction:

Focus on Growth. The *Blueprint for Reform* encourages schools to use data in fundamentally different ways. Schools are measured not only by achievement level but also by growth. Under this plan, if a teacher helps a fifth-grade student's reading to move from a second-grade to a fourth-grade level, he or she is not labeled as a failure but as a model for others to emulate. And progress over time will matter—one bad year will no longer cause a school to be identified as “failing” because data from several years are reviewed to determine how a school is doing.



Empowering Teachers and Schools

Our Challenge: *While NCLB helped schools to focus on specific student groups, its emphasis was more on punishing than empowering. An effect of the program was that teachers and school leaders lived in fear of not measuring up on a few key tests and of being reprimanded and labeled as failures (or even closed) if students did not score well on tests. If they were identified as “failing,” they had no real choices for fixing their plan because the federal government prescribed only one track—“one size fits all.”*

The Blueprint’s New Direction:

More Funds to Reach High Goals. The *Blueprint* takes a much more positive and empowering position on student achievement. The plan encourages states to adopt rigorous goals for student performance and rewards and provides incentives for accomplishing those goals and for showing progress. What’s more, districts interested in reform can compete for *additional funding—beyond what they currently receive through regular (formula) programs*—to achieve their goals through grant programs, such as Race to the Top, Promise Neighborhoods, and Investing in Innovation. Our plan will maintain funding from regular, core programs such as Title I and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. In fact the president’s budget includes a historic increase in funding for K–12 education, of which approximately 80 percent will be for these kinds of existing programs.

Fewer Restrictions About How to Get There. In the past, schools not making AYP were required to follow prescribed programs, but the *Blueprint* strategy is more fluid, offering school systems an array of local choices and control. While maintaining a high bar for accountability, it recognizes that what works in a rural school, for example, may not work in urban areas or other regions.



Making a Bold Case for Reform

***Our Challenge:** There have been so many reforms proposed over the last few decades that teachers may feel at times like they are just going through the latest motions, checking off the latest “to do” items on an agenda that merely patches problems in education without a clear sense of purpose or direction.*

The *Blueprint*’s New Direction:

A World-Class Education. The president’s reform agenda calls on teachers to take even more bold and courageous steps to completely transform what we offer students in this country so that all have equal access to a quality education. Others may see the goal of preparing every student for college or career as pie in the sky, but President Obama believes that education is a great equalizer. Skeptics say we must first solve our country’s economic problems, but the president knows that we have to educate ourselves into economic security.

What teachers say they like most about the *Blueprint* is that it asks them to deeply examine their practice and to be willing to improve it to meet the needs of students today. The *Blueprint* challenges us all to live what we believe—that all students can learn and that they are all worth our investment.



Addressing Teachers' Concerns

This section addresses questions that Secretary Duncan has heard frequently when talking with teachers about education reform.

Why does the government seem to blame teachers for problems schools face? That would be crazy, like blaming doctors for a flu epidemic. President Obama understands that most teachers are doing a very good job and that all of the problems in education can't be put on the backs of teachers. Instead of blaming teachers, he and Secretary Duncan call for teachers and school leaders to collaborate with one another to raise achievement so that all students are college- and career-ready. If teachers aren't performing up to that level, they should get the support they need and the opportunity to improve.

How is the proposed plan for testing different from what we have had? Assessment is important because educators use the data to evaluate student learning and determine what to focus on to help each student. *Under the Blueprint, student achievement levels should NOT be the sole measure of performance.* Instead, the *Blueprint* focuses not on one point in time but on growth and progress over time. Schools with low achievement shouldn't be singled out for the most dramatic interventions unless they persistently remain in the bottom 5 percent of all schools and show no growth.

Since teachers can't control the environments from which their students come, isn't it unfair to hold all teachers to the same standards for student achievement? No two students are alike, and some come to school with baggage that makes them harder to teach than others. The *Blueprint* recognizes this by suggesting state school systems focus on the whole child and reward growth, not just on arbitrary achievement levels. The *Blueprint* also helps teachers to reach difficult students by providing resources to help address comprehensive approaches to meeting students' needs.

Why does the plan ask schools to compete for federal dollars? Eighty percent of federal dollars for K–12 schools will come through the same funding sources as before—straight to states and districts without any competition. The *Blueprint* includes some new competitive programs to offer incentives for school districts and states to develop strategies and plans to improve their students' achievement. These programs will direct resources based not only on the quality of the proposed plan but also on the needs of the students who will be served.

Why should teacher pay be determined by test scores? Test scores are not the sole indicator of a teacher's performance, but, if used correctly, they should indicate how well students are learning. If done right, it makes some sense that growth in student achievement should be one part of a teacher's evaluation. A comprehensive teacher evaluation system also considers classroom observations, peer reviews, professional development, and other contributions that the teacher makes to the school.

How will the *Blueprint* support and change my teaching? Highly effective teachers could be rewarded with more recognition, higher pay, and leadership opportunities, including mentoring others, and incentives, such as more money. Some highly effective teachers will be offered additional compensation for teaching in high-need schools. Effective teachers should participate in professional development that builds on their current skills and improves their practice to make them more effective. Struggling teachers could be given more intensive training and mentoring and be observed more frequently in efforts to improve their practice. If their performance does not improve, they may be counseled to consider taking on a different role at the school or choosing another profession.

All teachers will use data to assess students' progress and to redirect their teaching. With the new accountability system's emphasis on growth, *teachers will feel less pressure for all students to perform at the same level*. Since schools won't be labeled as "failing" based solely on the results of one test on one day, teachers won't feel the need to focus only on students just below the proficiency bar. Instead of mandating a single set of interventions for every school, the *Blueprint* gives most schools the flexibility to determine the right strategies to help them improve. Teachers will be able to work with school leaders to help determine the changes that will best meet students' needs. Teachers will also be given more time to meet with teams in their schools to evaluate data and make plans to address areas of concern as a community.

Why does the plan require that teachers be fired? It doesn't. However, it does focus on dramatically reforming the schools whose students' test scores consistently fall in the bottom 5 percent—schools where performance is extremely low and not improving. For these chronically underperforming schools, the plan offers districts choices from an array of models. Some of the models would involve changes in the staffing of the school, others would keep the teachers in place and focus on specific strategies like expanded learning time. Teachers can and should be involved in choosing a turnaround model for their school.

Most of the plan is about supporting teachers and leaders in our schools, recognizing and rewarding those who are doing a great job. The budget provides a \$350 million increase in funding for programs that support teachers and leaders, more than has ever been requested.

What about principals? What part do they play in the president's plan for reform? The plan recognizes the need for school leaders who understand what resources and support systems teachers need to succeed. States are encouraged to invest in principal development, enhancing their training and evaluations, and restructuring their jobs so that they are free to work with teachers collaboratively and make authentic assessments. To make this happen, we are proposing to increase fivefold the funding for programs that prepare effective teachers and other school leaders to be effective principals.

Does the *Blueprint for Reform* favor charter schools? Under the new plan, do charter schools receive preferential funding? The *Blueprint* does not favor one form of public school over another. As Secretary Duncan says, he is for whatever works well for students. Of the \$28 billion the president has proposed for the 2011 budget, *less than 2 percent* is set aside specifically for charter and other autonomous public schools.

Do the Obama administration's competitions favor urban schools over rural populations?

No. One of the strengths of the plan is that it focuses on need, which we know exists in both rural and urban areas. For this reason, the *Blueprint* offers rural and other high-need communities a competitive priority in competitions. Furthermore, the *Blueprint's* emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) has the potential to improve the technology that rural schools can access, offering students a broader range of courses.

What is there in the plan for rural schools? In addition to maintaining a dedicated funding stream for rural schools, much in the *Blueprint* addresses rural needs, including support for rural districts that use distance education to provide students with access to a more complete education. It also removes barriers that make it difficult for rural schools to recruit and keep the best teachers. And it increases funding, cuts the red tape necessary to get it, and allows local communities greater spending flexibility.

Under this plan, what are families and communities asked to do to contribute to their children's

success? Families and communities play absolutely critical roles in student success. Both President Obama and Secretary Duncan have listened to parents telling their stories and relaying their concerns about the current crisis in education. The *Blueprint* doubles the federal funding required to be set aside for family engagement and encourages school systems to come up with innovative and effective approaches, through programs such as Investing in Innovation and Promise Neighborhoods, for school systems to tap into these resources. Based on feedback we received on the *Blueprint*, the plan proposes to double funding for parent engagement—from 1 to 2 percent of Title I dollars—or a total of \$270 million. At the same time, states will be allowed to reserve an additional 1 percent of Title I dollars for grant programs that support, incentivize, and help expand districts' evidence-based parental involvement practices.

More Information

To read the *Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, visit <http://www.ed.gov/ESEA> Blueprint.

To post a comment, visit <http://www.ed.gov/blog>.

To view the U.S. Department of Education's Teaching Ambassador Fellows discussing the *Blueprint for Reform*, visit <http://www.youtube.com/user/used#govg/c/DC2A8F3C75E7BB20>.



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