

DUNCAN ATTACKS TESTING—BUT WILL IT LEAD TO A CHANGE IN FEDERAL POLICIES?

By Louis Freedberg

During the dog days of summer, one of the nation's best known supporters of testing students to hold schools—and teachers—accountable unleashed a harsh but little noticed critique of testing.

The attack was published [in a blog post](#) on the U.S. Department of Education's website—and was authored by none other than U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

Sounding much like some of his critics who have accused the Obama administration of excessively emphasizing testing in student and school accountability systems, Duncan said the focus of too many tests has been on measuring basic skills, and not sufficiently on critical thinking and deeper learning.

Testing should never be the main focus of our schools. Educators work all day to inspire, to intrigue, to know their students – not just in a few subjects, and not just in “academic” areas. There’s a whole world of skills that tests can never touch that are vital to students’ success.

No test will ever measure what a student is, or can be. It’s simply one measure of one kind of progress. Yet in too many places, testing itself has become a distraction from the work it is meant to support.

I believe testing issues today are sucking the oxygen out of the room in a lot of schools – oxygen that is needed for a healthy transition to higher standards, improved systems for data, better aligned assessments, teacher professional development, evaluation and support, and more.

He signaled that that this was not an abstract statement, but would be linked to concrete actions during the coming school year. "This issue is a priority for us, and we'll continue to work throughout the fall on efforts to cut back on over-testing," he said.

At the same time, rather than focusing on the failures of public schools, he praised teachers for their role in what he called the "unprecedented achievements" of the previous year—including record high school graduation rates, sharp reductions in drop out rates, and big increases in

college enrollments of historically disadvantaged students.

He said these outcomes "entails enormously hard work by educators." "For these achievements, we should celebrate American teachers, principals and students and their families," he said.

This struck a very different tone from [when he welcomed the decision](#) by the Los Angeles Times exactly four years ago to publish the names and rankings of teachers showing how effective or ineffective they were based on the paper's "value added" calculations. "What's there to hide?" Duncan said at the time.

Whether Duncan's comments signal a major shift in policy on the part of the Obama administration -- or are simply a part of its ongoing efforts to improve its tense relations with teachers and teachers unions -- remains to be seen.

"I don't think there's any movement in the fundamental concept (of using tests to hold schools accountable) because he has to enforce No Child Behind Law," said State Board of Education President Michael Kirst, referring to Duncan's comments.

He noted that the U.S. Department of Education, while granting a one-year extension of the NCLB waivers to the seven California districts, which are part of the CORE consortium, is not backing off on its insistence that the districts link teacher evaluations to test scores. As is the case with states whose waivers have been extended, the districts have been given an extra year to implement the teacher evaluation provision of the waiver. But regardless of the timeline, there is no sign that the administration intends to back off on enforcing it.

[Bill Honig](#), the former State Superintendent of Public Instruction, is similarly skeptical about Duncan's pronouncements. "The proof is in the pudding," said Honig who is chairperson of the Instructional Quality Commission created by the State Board of Education to revise the state's curriculum frameworks to bring them in line with the Common Core. "The rhetoric may be changing, but he (Duncan) hasn't changed his policies yet."

Will rhetoric translate into any significant changes? The ball is now clearly in Duncan's court to demonstrate whether it will.

Read Duncan's comments [here](#).