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Duncan says Mass. can't be complacent about education

By Scot Lehigh | GLOBE COLUMNIST | MARCH 14, 2014

SECRETARY OF Education Arne Duncan has a message for Massachusetts: Yes, education reform has been a success here, but we still have a long way to go.

"By any objective measure, Massachusetts is at the top nationally, so there should be a huge sense of pride in that," Duncan told me in an interview. Now the bad news: "Frankly Massachusetts is being out-competed by the majority of children in many other countries."

The secretary offered this sobering statistic to underscore his point: "Forty percent of your high-school graduates are taking remedial classes when they go to four-year universities. That's a staggering number... Four in 10 of your high school graduates aren't ready for college."

Duncan, whom I sat down with after an event at Match Charter Public High School in Boston, credits state Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester with confronting those facts head on.

"Why I love working with Mitch so much . . . is that there is no sense of complacency," he said. "In fact, there is a huge sense of urgency."

"A desire to fine-tune the funding formula shouldn't be deal-breaker." – Secretary Duncan

Sadly, we have yet to see a similar sense of urgency in the Legislature. With an important deadline looming, the joint education committee still hasn't reported out a bill building on the successful education reforms of 2010. One big sticking point is whether to allow more charter schools.

So, with cities like Boston, Holyoke, and Fall River now up against the charter cap, does Duncan, secretary of education for the most liberal president since LBJ, think Massachusetts should raise the cap again? Duncan noted that he didn't know the specifics of the legislation — no one does yet, because nothing has been released — but said he thought policy-makers should be doing more of what works.

“My general sense is, in national studies, that Boston’s charter schools do as well or better than virtually any other place,” Duncan said. “So where you have high performance, where you have demand that’s greater than supply, when you have parents looking for options, you need ... to provide that.”

Senate education committee chair Sonia Chang-Diaz, who is widely identified as the hold-up, told me she hopes to move a bill, but said she is still trying to resolve some issues. One of them is her concern that the state hasn’t fully lived up to its reimbursement arrangement for traditional schools that lose students to charters.

That’s some limited legitimacy to that issue; that account was underfunded by three percent last year and is projected to be at about 73 percent of full funding this year. Still, Massachusetts has one of the nation’s most generous reimbursement formulas, paying the traditional schools adjustment dollars for six years after a student has departed for a charter. So it’s really a matter of whether a traditional school will be reimbursed 225 percent for a student it no longer educates or somewhat less. (Charter schools, by contrast, lose all of a student’s educational dollars the quarter after he or she leaves.)

Given that reality, concerns like those shouldn’t be magnified into deal-breakers. If necessary, adjustments and recalibrations can be made later. It’s more important to keep education reform proceeding apace.

Duncan also made it clear he has little patience with the charge, repeated almost reflexively by charter foes, that charters aren’t public schools.

“Charter schools are public schools,” he said. “They are accountable to us. They are our children, our tax dollars. Where they are successful, let’s do more of it. Where they aren’t successful, let’s close them down.”

As for the promise of charter innovation, he came to Match to learn more about its intensive tutoring program — a program that has proved so promising that schools in Chicago and Houston are now using it.

“It’s fascinating,” he said. “This high-dosage tutoring seems to be having a profound impact on kids’ lives. Match, right here in Boston, is having a huge impact on kids on the South Side of Chicago.”