



Arne Duncan: American Education Includes a “Laptop on Every Desk”

“The future of American education undoubtedly includes a laptop on every desk and universal Internet access in every home. It definitely includes more on-line learning,” Duncan [proclaimed](#) at a conference in Austin, Texas, last week. While education remains a state and local responsibility, he added, “Ensuring education equity is at the heart of the federal role in education. It opens doors for all students as long as we make sure that the students most in need have access.”



During the conference, Duncan claimed that “American education is decentralized,” and that such decentralization can stunt the availability of certain beneficial technologies: “School leaders are under a lot of pressure today to cope with diminishing resources and rising expectations. They don’t always see how investments in technology can save money down the road.”

The Education Secretary offered examples of how certain states have innovated their education systems with policies that encourage tech-friendly learning environments. West Virginia Governor Bob Wise and former Florida Governor Jeb Bush have implemented these critical policies, Duncan asserted, adding, “We will do all we can at the federal level to support the use of technology in education.” He continued:

We talked to some teachers in a school system that just brought in new technology two months ago and they were already raving about how much time it saves. They said their students are much more engaged. Young people see adults working in front of computers. They know that’s the future. The more that our classrooms mimic the real world, the more likely that our kids will take school seriously.

While the Bush administration went to great lengths to expand the federal government’s role in education, the Obama administration has augmented it even further. For example, President Obama’s 2009 economic stimulus law provided billions of dollars in [new federal education spending](#), including a myriad of new grants and programs:

- The act includes \$5 billion for early learning programs, including Head Start, Early Head Start, child care, and programs for children with special needs.
- The act also provides \$77 billion for reforms to strengthen elementary and secondary education, including \$48.6 billion to stabilize state education budgets (of which \$8.8 billion may be used for other government services) and to encourage states to make improvements in teacher effectiveness and



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ensure that all schools have highly qualified teachers; make progress toward college- and career-ready standards and rigorous assessments that will improve both teaching and learning; improve achievement in low-performing schools, through intensive support and effective interventions; and gather information to improve student learning, teacher performance, and college and career readiness through enhanced data systems.

- The act provides \$5 billion in competitive funds to spur innovation and chart ambitious reform to close the achievement gap.

These mass expanses in education spending — and now, a federal request to provide laptops and iPhones to students — combined with new initiatives that provide the federal government with more authority over education, have prompted many critics to question the Obama administration’s motives.

One such critic, Michael Hiltzik of the *Los Angeles Times*, gave Duncan an F grade for “his fatuous hyping of computers and other digital technology in the classroom,” which purportedly show little evidence of learning achievement. The benefits of this technological proposal, Hiltzik wrote, “flowed entirely in one direction: toward Apple and its partners in the computerized classroom campaign.”

In another [article](#), the *Times* columnist recalls the pitch made by Duncan and FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski that every schoolchild is entitled to a laptop computer. “Where had I heard this before?” Hiltzik wrote. “So I did a bit of research, and found it. The quote I recalled was, ‘Books will soon be obsolete in the schools.... Our school system will be completely changed in 10 years.’”

“The revolutionary technology being heralded in that statement wasn’t the Internet or the laptop, but the motion picture,” Hiltzik contended. The declaration took place in 1913, and the speaker was Thomas Edison, who proposed that book learning would ultimately be replaced with instruction through the moving image. “Here’s another similarity,” Hiltzik noted:

The push for advanced technology in the schoolroom then and now was driven by commercial, not pedagogical, considerations. As an inventor of motion picture technology, Edison stood to profit from its widespread application. And the leading promoter of the replacement of paper textbooks by e-books and electronic devices today is Apple, which announced at a media event last month that it dreams of a world in which every pupil reads textbooks on an iPad or a Mac.

Another critic and one of the country’s most distinguished education experts, Diane Ravitch, also analyzed Duncan’s performance, and added six more Fs to the Education Secretary’s report card. In an essay entitled, “[Flunking Arne Duncan](#),” Ravitch scrutinized Duncan’s support for national academic standards for primary and secondary education.

Her analysis concluded that standardized teaching “makes school boring and robs classrooms of time for the imaginative instruction and activities that enliven learning.” In effect, federal meddling in education ties teachers’ hands and cripples the art and creativity of teaching. “Does Duncan respect the limited role of the federal government in education?” Ravitch asks:

No. Duncan has expanded the role of the federal government in unprecedented ways. He seems not to know that education is the responsibility of state and local governments, as defined by the Tenth amendment to our Constitution. States and local school districts now look to Washington to tell them how to reform their schools and must seek permission to deviate from the regulations written by the U.S. Department of Education. George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) created the template for this growing federal control of education, but Arne Duncan’s Race to the Top has made it possible for Washington to dictate education policy across the nation. Grade: F.



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All in all, the dissatisfaction of Hiltzik and Ravitch with Obama's Education Department stems from an overreaching federal authority that is driven through academic intervention and colossal spending measures — spending measures that have [no empirical evidence](#) showing that they work to increase student learning. The Bush administration initiated a damning trend — and the Obama administration has not only followed the trend, but accelerated it.



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