

Education Secretary no fan of status quo

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

This week, Education Secretary Arne Duncan offered new evidence that he wants striking changes in public schools — not just a better-funded status quo. Duncan said putting big city mayors in charge of troubled school districts has generally worked well and should be used in far more places.

We think such an a la carte approach makes sense. In too many big cities the diffusion of responsibility for school performance undercuts accountability and gets in the way of fundamental change. Special-interest meddling is also common and explains why the average tenure of a big city school superintendent is three years. Mayors, on the other hand, tend to focus on the key question of whether schools are getting better.

This focus has helped schools rebound in Boston and Chicago and yielded long-overdue reforms in New York. Unsurprisingly, this focus is missing in Los Angeles, where Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's school takeover was effectively thwarted by the teachers union and the courts.

But opposition to mayoral influence extends far beyond teachers unions. Instead, it's close to the norm in the broader education establishment, which largely opposes charter schools, voucher programs, the tough standards of the federal No Child Left Behind act — anything, really, that discomfits the existing power structure.

Duncan will see this for himself Saturday at the San Diego Convention Center, where he will address the National School Boards Association. Given his recent announcement that he will withhold federal stimulus money from states and school districts that used initial funds to prop up the education status quo instead of to pursue reform, he might be booed off the stage.

Duncan's willingness to tick off this establishment could not be more welcome. In 1983, the school reform movement was born with the release of "A Nation at Risk," a federal report that warned poor public schools were a profound threat to America's future. Among its many recommendations, the report called for spending much more on public education; raising standards; and developing effective ways to track student progress and teacher effectiveness.

Twenty-six years later, inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending has gone up 75 percent. Standards are generally higher. But reform in many other areas has been stymied. Teacher tenure remains entrenched and raises are routinely based on continuing education course work, not performance. The result has been modest, spotty improvements in schools.

Against this backdrop, the education establishment's argument that school quality is a function of spending is

absurd. Thankfully, Duncan “ and, apparently, President Barack Obama as well “ understands money alone is no panacea for all that ails public education.

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