

The one who loved evaluations will now be evaluated

By **MARIA FERGUSON**

Arne Duncan made important progress and ruffled some important feathers. His legacy is yet to be determined.

This month marks the departure of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. After nearly seven years on the job, Secretary Duncan surprised almost everyone by leaving just a year shy of his pledge to remain with the administration for the long haul. After a month of dramatic arrivals (the Pope) and exits (John Boehner), Duncan's announcement left many in Washington wondering about the state of play in public education.

The legacy conversations have already begun around Washington, but currently three things can be said about Duncan. He leaves in his wake some good news: High school graduation rates have risen for the third year in a row. Some bad news: The younger generation seems to have no interest in teaching, and there are teacher shortages in communities around the nation. And a bit

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of uncertainty: Will ESEA be reauthorized and what does the federal role in education look like post-NCLB?

Looking back on Duncan's time in Washington, his personal history clearly influenced his actions as secretary. Schooled in the rough-and-tumble politics of

Chicago, Duncan is known as a fierce competitor with little tolerance for excuses. His impatience and aggressive push for results were captured perfectly by President Obama the day he announced Duncan's resignation: "He's done more to bring our education system, sometimes kicking

and screaming, into the 21st century than anyone else."

That kicking and screaming at times reached a fevered pitch, especially when it came from the education community. Duncan was not always popular among education policy makers and pundits, but he never really seemed all that bothered by the criticism. "Water off a duck's back" is how he described it to a *Politico* reporter during a recent interview.

ARRA was OK

While his tenure as education secretary came with a larger helping of drama than most of his predecessors, Duncan himself does not deserve all the blame. External factors, including a crippling recession and a divisive political environment, made his already complicated job even more so. In his first year, Duncan had to develop a plan to move huge amounts of money out the door in short order. The recession was taking a toll on school districts and state departments of education, and Duncan's team needed to think quickly and move fast to limit the damage done by layoffs and cuts. Race to the Top and the School Improvement Grants were the two major programs supported by the American Reinvestment Recovery Act (ARRA) of 2009. At first blush, giving out billions of dollars in education



funding may seem like the easiest part of the education's secretary's job, but, like most things in life, the devil is in the details. Duncan's team did not get all the details right, but most believe the efforts were well-intentioned and fairly thoughtful, considering the circumstances.

Duncan's focus on higher, college- and career-ready standards for all students likely contributed to the rising graduation rate, but his decision to play hardball with high-stakes teacher evaluations was ill-conceived, poorly timed, and it alienated far too many important stakeholders. While most effective leaders know that making change is an unpopular, challenging endeavor, there is a fine line between leading reluctant people to higher ground and unleashing shock and awe on a population that is already fighting to get by. Duncan's impatient push to improve teaching obscured the reality of school improvement: No one lever can change the entire system. Improving classroom instruction requires a multidimensional battle plan fought on several fronts, teaching being just one of them.

A smart move

To his credit, Duncan was astute enough to see that the teacher evaluation component of the NCLB waivers was creating serious problems for some states just as they were trying to implement new, more challenging standards. His administration backed off the strict timeline they had set for states, giving them some much-needed breathing room. That willingness to recognize a flawed policy and to make even modest amends is rare

Coming to America

Maria Voles Ferguson

When I want to get in touch with my own immigrant roots, I usually look to the cinema for help. Like many second-generation Italian kids from New York, the early years of my life were soaked in the Italian traditions of family, food, hard work, and the church. Movies like "The Godfather" (not the violent part — the more pastoral scenes about family and Italian life), "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" (I am not Greek, but the similarities are striking), and "Moonstruck" (spot-on perfect) make my heart ache with familial longing. Often, I have wished for just one day back in those simpler times. I would love to share with my own children a day spent surrounded by family, talking and eating for hours at a time, utterly oblivious to the world's machinations because no one had a cell phone or 850 cable channels.



The author's mother is seated on the lap of the author's grandmother.

My parents, born to Italian immigrants who came to the U.S. in search of a better life, had feet in both the old world and the new. Their life in America brought opportunity and success, but inside themselves they remained tied to our people and our traditions. My three sisters and I were nurtured and educated thanks to the vision and determination of past generations. Because of that, we still carry the Italian flag inside our hearts. Americans, yes; but, inside ourselves, immigrants still.

and admirable. Many political types would sooner die than admit they were wrong.

The Duncan administration also gets props for drawing attention to the financial stress and burden that now defines postsecondary education for so many students. The skyrocketing costs of college, the charlatans that prey on students desperate to get a degree no matter what the terms, and the lack of transparency and accountability among higher education institutions were all part of Duncan's agenda. Although some aspects of the administration's plan to hold colleges and universities more accountable to their student customers went too far (Duncan had to dial down the department's planned system to "rate" schools to help students make smarter

choices), shining a light on some very real concerns about how students access and pay for higher education was an important thing to do. Ensuring that all students can access

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a high-quality postsecondary education without getting into debt up to their eyeballs is such an important issue that it will remain in the spotlight even after this administration is gone.

All told, Arne Duncan's legacy will probably be inextricably linked to the future of

ESEA, the perennial bridesmaid of education legislation. Still unauthorized despite several near visits to the altar, the future of the federal role in education as defined by ESEA remains a mystery. While the secretary did not get to see NCLB finally reauthorized, his signature policy move — federal NCLB waivers in return for state policy buy-in — have made an indelible mark and likely will remain the law of the land for some time. The 2016 presidential campaign, with nearly half of the Republican wannabes expressing a desire to eliminate the U.S. Department of Education, will no doubt confuse the issue of the appropriate federal role even more. Come January, that won't be Arne Duncan's problem anymore. That's at least one thing for certain. ■