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## Education secretary calls for end to infighting

Duncan says bold plans will get stimulus funding

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NEWARK -- Stakeholders competing for \$4.35 billion that the U.S. Department of Education will award to states with bold plans to improve student performance will stand a better chance if they stop fighting within their own educational systems.

"You're not going to agree on everything, but keep coming together, stay at the table," U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan told a sold-out audience at an education conference Tuesday at the University of Delaware.

Only half the problem in education is the lack of investment, he said, the other half is that people spend too much time fighting each other.

Disagreements aside, he rated Delaware as a good candidate for a chunk of the federal pie.

"Delaware has a chance, I think, to lead the country. This is a state of manageable size. ... Delaware can help lead us where we need to go," said Duncan, who spoke as part of the university's "Creating Knowledge-Based Partnerships" conference, the fifth in a series designed to spotlight opportunities for partnerships among UD, government and business leaders.

Duncan prefaced his remarks by saying the United States has an unacceptable 30 percent drop-out rate, with 1.2 million leaving school each year before they graduate.

Many of those people are doomed to failure because there are simply not enough jobs out there for them, he said.

"Many other countries have passed us by, and collectively we pay a price," he said.

Duncan listed a set of priorities that he believes will help turn things around educationally.

Early-childhood education topped that list.

"In education, we have to get out of the catch-up business," he said. "To get out of the catch-up game, to me, it goes to early education."

Duncan said he wants to invest in colleges, and community colleges can play a huge role in the job market.

He favors grants that help "make sure that every child has a chance to go to college" as well as "income-based repayments" for financial assistance, including forgiveness on the remainder of a loan if the recipient stays in the same job for 10 years.

Simplifying financial aid forms also is high on his list.

"Basically, you have to have a Ph.D to figure it out," he said. "And the problem is the students don't have a Ph.D yet. That's why they're going to college."

Duncan said he also wants to push the agenda for the K-12 side of education, and the money to drive that change has to be dramatically increased.

"Simply propping up the status quo doesn't get us as a country where it needs to go," he said.

The country also needs to engage in a conversation about how to improve the bottom 1 percent of students who are struggling, he said, and if that one thing were to be successfully tackled each year, it could help turn education around.

Duncan said he is looking for innovation rather than the same old bureaucracy.

"The best ideas in education are never going to come from Washington," he said. "They're always going to come from the local level."

The \$4.35 billion stimulus is a great opportunity on the local level, and his education department is looking for states that are willing to raise the bar, he said.

In addition, Duncan addressed the need to improve student assessments, to open schools beyond six hours a day, five days a week and nine months a year, to continue teaching the arts within the school curriculum, and to make sure the best teachers go to places where they are needed.

More than better money, many teachers will be attracted to struggling schools where there is good leadership, he said.

"There are no good schools without good principals," Duncan said during a question-and-answer session. "They just don't exist. So you can argue that this is the most important thing you can do.

"Getting the best of the best where we need it most, I think, will take us to another level," he said.

Colonial School District Superintendent George Meney was one of more than 500 educators, business leaders and others who attended the conference at Clayton Hall and listened over lunch to Duncan's address.

"His focus on some local control and allowing districts and states to approach things is refreshing," Meney said. "The federal government has spent too much time being regulatory. Let the decisions be made at the level that affects the kids. I thought that was good."

Tuesday's conference, titled "Vision 2015 and Delaware's Race to the Top," also included speakers such as Delaware Gov. Jack Markell and Paul Herdman, chairman of the Rodel Foundation, a major financial backer of Vision 2015, an education reform plan that seeks to make Delaware a world leader in education by that year.

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