Duncan Adamant about 2010 NCLB Reauthorization

During multiple public appearances in September, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan asserted that the Obama Administration is committed to a reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2010. The law, which is the current version of the Elementary & Secondary Education Act (ESEA), was supposed to have been reauthorized in 2007 (after having been enacted in 2002), but action was forestalled by partisan gridlock and the impending presidential election of 2008.

Duncan indicated in a major speech on September 24 that NCLB has significant flaws and that “we can’t wait any longer” for the reauthorization to take place. Specifically, Duncan credited No Child with highlighting the achievement gap between high- and low-performing schools, but he asserted that the ESEA framework needs to do more to bridge the gap. The Secretary also indicated in his remarks that NCLB has led to too many schools unfairly being labeled as failures and that the law is too reliant on standardized test results.

Duncan’s speech was the first in a series of events the Obama Administration is holding at the Education Department focused on gathering stakeholder input on the ESEA and what needs to be included in a reauthorization. Other events will run through December and will be led in part by Assistant Secretary Carmel Martin, who previously served as Ted Kennedy’s senior education staffer and who I met with in 2005 to discuss the AAG’s concerns with No Child. Separately, the Department has pledged to hold “listening sessions” in all 50 states.

As readers of this column are well aware, the AAG has advocated for dedicated funding for geography education as part of the ESEA. Through the ongoing efforts of AAG members and staff to bring this issue to the attention of key members of Congress, it is our hope that the next enacted version of the law will affirm geography’s importance as a K-12 discipline. And now that the Administration has laid out a timetable for action, we will hopefully no longer be held back by Washington’s oftend-frustrating political machinations.

Political Geography of Health Care Reform

One of Washington’s charming quirks (some would say major flaws) is that Congressional action is often dominated by veteran members from a few less-populous states. This dynamic of the geography of politics has certainly been playing itself out in the debate over health care reform.

Most health care policy experts would tell you that the key committee in the health care debate is the Senate Finance Committee (SFC). In large part, this is because the SFC is chaired by Max Baucus, a moderate Democrat from Montana who has questioned the political viability of the so-called “public option.” Baucus’s state, which ranks 44th in population, is one of several states with smaller populations with Senators poised to make-or-break this key issue. Other key members from less-populous states include Kent Conrad (D) of North Dakota (ranked 47th); Ben Nelson (D) of Nebraska (ranked 38th); Mike Enzi (R) of Wyoming (ranked 50th); Mike Begich (D) of Alaska (ranked 48th); Jay Rockefeller (D) of West Virginia (ranked 37th); and Susan Collins (R) and Olympia Snowe (R) of Maine (ranked 40th).

To highlight this point, Conrad, who is a member of the SFC, recently noted that “Byron Dorgan (North Dakota’s other Senator) and I hold the same number of votes in this place as Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer (who represent the most-populous state of California).”

Another aspect of political geography is playing itself out in the House side of the health care reform debate, where the so-called “Blue Dog” Democrats have resisted efforts by Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the Democratic leadership to pass a bill quickly. These Blue Dogs are generally Democrats from conservative states and districts who aren’t as progressive as other members of the caucus. While a number of them have pledged to vote for a moderate health reform package along the lines of the Baucus bill, they have resisted voting for more liberal legislation containing the public option. Accordingly, Pelosi has been forced to count votes carefully before deciding how to move legislation through her chamber.

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Annual Meeting Sessions on Geography & Mental Health

The AAG will be sponsoring a special set of sessions on geography & mental health at its Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., April 14-18, 2010. If you are interested in participating in these sessions, please submit a 250-word abstract no later than November 18, 2009 to Megan Overbey at moverbey@aag.org. Earlier submission is encouraged. For more information on these sessions contact AAG Executive Director Douglas Richardson at drichardson@aag.org.

Annual Meeting Discounts for AAG Members

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Remember to keep your AAG membership up to date so you can take advantage of discounted rates for the 2010 Annual Meeting. Login to your account at www.aag.org and renew today!