

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH SECRETARY ARNE DUNCAN

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ANGELA GREILING KEANE: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. My name is Angela Greiling Keane. I'm a reporter for Bloomberg News and the 106th president of the National Press Club. We are the world's leading professional organization for journalists committed to our profession's future through our programming with events like this while fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the National Press Club, please visit our website at www.press.org. To donate to programs offered to the public through our National Press Club Journalism Institute, please visit www.press.org/institute.

On behalf of our members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker today, as well as those of you attending today's event. I'd also like to welcome our C-SPAN and Public Radio Audiences. You can follow the action today on Twitter using the hashtag NPClunch. After our guest's speech concludes, we'll have a question and answer period. I will ask as many questions as time permits.

For the past five years, our guest today has used the bully pulpit, executive authority, and financial incentives to change the landscape of American education. In President Obama's first term, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, leveraged almost five billion in money for school reform through a nationwide competition. More than 30 states and the District of Columbia won Race to the Top grants intended to help them adopt higher standards, expand access to charter schools, improve teacher effectiveness and improve early education programs.

These grants also have funded the development of new tests aligned with the controversial Common Core standards. The standards developed by the states aimed to set high bars for what students should learn in school that are consistent across the states. But in part because of the administration support, some conservatives are branding the Common Core a federal intrusion into education.

Just last week, Florida Governor Rick Scott announced that he's working to withdraw the state from a group of states creating one of the Common Core assessments. Secretary Duncan's position is that Common Core has "the capacity to change education in the best of ways, raising the bar for students, strengthening our economy and building a clear path to the middle class."

When President Obama won a second term, few in Washington doubted that Secretary Duncan would stay on for a second term. He's been a professional basketball player, director of a mentoring program for low income urban children, a big city school chief in Chicago, but he says this is the best job he's ever had. Now in his second term, Secretary Duncan has put expanding access to preschool at the top of his priority list. He's also advocating a rating system for colleges that he says will help students get a greater value for their increasingly expensive degrees.

With the political polarization in Washington and the government on the brink of a shutdown tonight, his mission faces tough challenges. Please help me give a warm National Press Club welcome to Education Secretary Arne Duncan. (Applause)

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Well, good afternoon and Angela, thank you so much for that kind introduction. In what seems to have become an annual rite, I'm here again today to report on the state of education in America. What I can tell you after nearly five years in Washington is that the public narrative that you hear inside the beltway and online simply doesn't reflect the reality that I see in classrooms in schools all across America.

This town often thinks that it's somehow the center of the universe. Well it is, in fact, instead an alternative universe. Here, you have some members of Congress who think the federal government has no role in public education; not as a backstop for accountability, not as a partner for enforcing laws and expanding educational opportunity, and not as a supporter of innovation and courage.

Also inhabiting this bubble are some armchair pundits who insist that our efforts to improve public education are somehow doomed to fail because they believe the government is incapable of meaningfully improving education, or because they think education reform can't possibly work since the real problem with schools is that so many children are born poor. In blogs, in books, in Tweets, some pundits even say our schools are performing just fine and that fundamental change isn't needed. Or that we have to address poverty first before schools can improve student achievement.

At the opposite extreme, other commentators declare a permanent state of crisis. They discount the value of great teachers and great school leaders and they call for the most disruptive changes possible with little heed for their impact on our nation's children. Too many inhabitants of this alternative universe are so supremely confident in their perspective that they have simply stopped listening to people with a different viewpoint.

Instead of talking with each other, and more importantly actually listening to each other, with respect, with humility and with a genuine interest in finding common ground, many of these people are just talking past each other ignoring plain evidence and deliberately distorting the other's positions. They're clearly not focusing on children students, they're focusing instead on false debates.

Fortunately, many people in the real world outside the beltway and blogosphere have tuned out this debate. They're too busy actually getting real work done. They're focusing on students, whether they're 3 years old, 13 or 33. All across America, states and districts are moving forward with courageous reforms. States have raised standards and expectations for students, and are piloting new and better assessments to show what students know and can do.

Teachers are thinking deeply about their practice and their profession. They're rewriting curricula and sharing lessons online. Technology is driving access to knowledge and innovation and instruction and professional development in unprecedented ways. And many of our lowest performing schools are implementing ambitious reforms for the first time to drive improvement and increase their student success.

Every state in America is wrestling with complex, real world questions about education; how to get better, faster, how to best serve children at risk and better support our nation's teachers, how to transition to higher standards, how to increase access to high quality early childhood education, and how to better control college costs.

These states are partnering with the federal government to break free of some of the rules that inhibit innovation and hold themselves accountable to a higher standard. And they are getting real results. Today, high school graduation rates are higher than they've been for over 30 years. College enrollment is up particularly among minority students. From 2007 and '08 to 2010, the high school graduation rate among African-Americans increased five percentage points to 66 percent. In that same period, the graduation rate among Hispanics jumped eight percentage points, up to 71 percent. These are very, very encouraging trends.

Partly it's because we've targeted dropout factories and provided unprecedented federal resources to turn them around and give young people and historically underserved communities a real shot in life. Ten years ago, half of African American high school students, 50 percent, and nearly four in ten Hispanic students actually attended dropout factories. That's a staggering statistic. We were actually perpetuating poverty and social failure.

But thanks to the hard work and courage of teachers, parents, community members, and most importantly students themselves, we've cut those proportions in half. Today, there are 700,000 fewer students in those failing schools than just four years ago. That is 700,000 students with a better chance of getting a good job, owning their own home, supporting their family and contributing to their communities. We still have a long, long way to go. But the data and the stories I hear directly from students in these schools give me great reason for hope.

We're making real progress, too, for students with disabilities. From 2001 to 2010, the percentage of students with disabilities who've graduated with a regular high school diploma increased from 48 percent to nearly 63 percent. Higher high school completion rates also boost enrollment in college. In fact, the census estimates that Hispanic college enrollment went up 50 percent between 2008 and 2012. While many other nations outperform us on international tests, a number of states and schools perform on par with the best in the world, offering models of success for others to learn from.

There is so much good work under way, and thankfully, the people doing this difficult, critically important work, are not distracted by all the noise and manufactured drama inside the bubble. In the real world, outside the Washington bubble, the vast majority of people aren't debating if college and career ready standards are actually needed. They're not advancing false narratives about a federal takeover of schools by mind controlling robots. They're just doing the hard work of putting high standards into practice.

They're not questioning if a thoughtful system of evaluation and support is needed for both principals and teachers. They know that evaluation historically was generally meaningless, not developmental and broken. And they're working together to help educators strengthen their craft and build real career ladders that recognize and reward excellence.

Even in my home town of Chicago, less than a year after a bitter strike, a recent study shows that teachers actually like the new evaluation system and want to make it work even if they still have lingering concerns about how test scores are being used. In the real world, most people aren't against meaningful testing. They know that we need some kind of tests to know if kids are actually learning and to hold everyone accountable including students themselves.

That doesn't mean they don't have concerns about teaching to the test or narrowing the curriculum. And I absolutely share those concerns. But the idea that we shouldn't gather real time data on what students know and are able to do is simply absurd. The goal of education is not just to teach, it's to have children, have our students learn.

Working together, the vast majority of states are creating better tests that measure essential skills such as critical thinking. States are development these assessments

because they want parents to know the truth about how their children are doing. And they want teachers to have the critical information they need to improve instruction. You can take a look at some of the sample items online. This will be a big leap forward for everyone.

Outside the bubble, people are not arguing in 140 characters or less about whether or not we need to fix poverty before we can fix education. That, like so many debates in education, is a false choice. Of course, we'll keep fighting poverty every single day, protecting the safety net, providing critically important wraparound services, feeding hungry children and their families, creating jobs, combating violence and providing greater access to health services.

But we can't use the brutal reality of poverty as a catch-all excuse to avoid responsibility for educating children at risk and helping them beat the odds as thousands and thousands do year after year after year. Our children only have one chance, one chance, to get a great education. They can't wait for poverty to magically disappear. In fact, for them and for their parents, education is the way out of poverty and they don't want to waste a minute. They are chasing the American dream with everything they have, and we have to help them get there. We all share in that responsibility; no one gets a pass.

As those of us who have worked in disadvantaged communities know, poor kids need extra long-term support and guidance. But educators, nonprofits and faith based partners are working together every single day to prove that poverty is not destiny. In the real world, parents just want their children to go to great schools. Most don't really care if it's a traditional public school, a magnet school or a charter school. They just want a school that is safe, where their child is cared about, and challenged to excel. Parents don't really debate if it's possible to turn around a low performing school. They can see for themselves if something is or is not working, and they're actually helping to lead these turnaround efforts themselves with a remarkable sense, a vision, and purpose.

Parents listen to the voices that matter the most, to their children, just as I did the other day with a panel of students from turnaround high schools from across the country. One young woman who attends Benjamin Franklin High School in Baltimore recalled the length the neighborhood parents used to go in order to avoid sending their children down the street to their school. Now with federal support to improve her school, there's actually a waiting list to attend. "People see that we have a plan," she said, "and we're going to accomplish our goals by any means."

I heard identical sentiments recently from students in San Francisco who attend a turnaround middle school there. The before and after stories are jarring, troubling and wonderfully inspiring all at the same time. Here in the Washington bubble, the prevailing narrative is that reformers and unions are somehow in a constant state of war. But in the real world, many unions are, in fact, partners in reform. While the media flecks to noise and controversy, the quiet, courageous work goes uncovered and unrecognized.

For example, in McDowell County, West Virginia, the AFT is working really hard to turn around an isolated rural school system. In Evansville, Indiana, where the NEA's priority schools program is under way, the local teachers union and administration worked together to lengthen both the school day and the school year. Here locally in Prince George's County, the union leader told me that he's supporting the difficult, controversial work of turning around schools because the children there deserve something better.

And in both Hillsborough County, Florida, in Jefferson County, Colorado, unions and management are working together to find new and better ways to evaluate teacher effectiveness and reward success in the classroom.

Now, you might ask, what difference does the debate about education inside the bubble, inside Washington, ultimately make to students and teachers and parents who want to ignore the education wars and just press ahead to solve real problems? Well, unfortunately, it does make a difference. Across the ideological spectrum, the pundits and politicians can disagree on many issues. Yet, from different starting points, education ideologues often end up making strange bedfellows that can only agree on one thing; to them, transformational change is somehow dangerous and must be stopped.

Inside the alternative universe, the perfect becomes the enemy of the good. It becomes a paralyzing force that props up the status quo and is a recipe for continued mediocrity. In my department, we've worked hard and steadily to be a good partner with states. But that's not always easy given the highly dysfunctional politics in Congress these days.

In the last year, Washington lawmakers introduced a word into the vocabulary of America's educators: sequester. That has only meant one thing, and that's cuts. Cuts to programs like Head Start, cuts to schools serving military families and Native American students, cuts to programs serving low income students and those with disabilities. Yet, in classic Washington fashion, Congress didn't sequester their own salaries or their budgets or their staffs; only people in the real world felt that pain.

Even now as we speak, Congress hasn't reached agreement on a spending bill. They're putting petty politics ahead of governing and they are hurting our children and hurting the country. They are creating stress and uncertainty for schools and districts in both red states and in blue states, in every state at a time when our schools need stability and need investment.

And think of all the unfinished business in Congress that actually affects our school children from comprehensive immigration reform to common sense gun laws. If the slaughter of children and teachers and the principal at Sandy Hook Elementary School didn't move them, I honestly don't know what will. In the meantime, mass shootings continue across our nation in malls and movie theaters, on basketball courts back home in Chicago and recently here in D.C. at the Navy Shipyard, all while other nations have chosen to work together to eliminate this threat.

Congress has always failed to carry out its basic core responsibilities on education. The bedrock laws affecting K-12 education and career education are long overdue for rewrites. Both the President and I pushed, and pushed hard, for a strong bipartisan reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. We'd still like to see one, and so would governors and state chiefs, as well as teachers and parents. If Congress can't work together on behalf of children, what can they do?

Education leaders need certainly to set goals and strategies to improve, and that's why our department has worked with 40 states to adopt ambitious performance targets that capture more students at risk, raise standards and move forward with accountability systems that go way beyond a narrow focus on a single test score.

I promise you, none of us will get everything right 100 percent of the time. But while learning and working together, what's working, what's not, and when necessary adjusting, we're seeing extraordinary courage and leadership by states as we challenge them to maintain a high bar while offering them as much flexibility as possible to be creative and to innovate.

Reform, as all of you know, is hard, tough, complex work. But where you have the right conditions and people are willing to move outside their comfort zones and work together, you're seeing great results. With Race to the Top funds, Tennessee's achievement school district is getting growth rates in the lowest performing schools that match the statewide average and is beginning to actually close achievement gaps. Tennessee is training tens of thousands of teachers to implement the new more rigorous college and career-ready standards.

Kentucky is boosting AP participation rates among minorities and low income students. They have one of the highest high school graduation rates in the country and they're one of the first states to assess students based on the new, higher standards. Florida is linking STEM students with working scientists. And North Carolina has a new STEM recognition program that helps educators share best practices in areas like curriculum, teacher training and linking students to jobs. And New York City is training music, art and drama teachers to work with special needs students.

Many communities are expanding critically important wrap around services to address social and emotional issues that get in the way of learning, issues that are compounded by both poverty and violence. I just finished an 1,100 mile back to school bus tour across the southwest that included stops at an early learning center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The governor of New Mexico, a Republican, is boosting spending on early learning. More than a dozen governors around the country, Democrats and Republicans alike, in tough economic times, have done exactly the same.

Congress ought to get out of Washington, to get out of here and go see for themselves what states are doing with early learning and then come back here and invest resources so that the federal government can partner with states to help them expand

access to high quality early learning for every four year old who wants it or needs it. This simply isn't a partisan issue in the real world. Educators, parents, business, law enforcement, faith based leaders and even military leaders all agree that high quality early learning is the single best investment that we can collectively make, returning \$7 in savings for every dollar we invest. An extraordinarily unusual and broad-based coalition is coming together to make this happen.

Here's another place I'd love for members of Congress to visit, Columbus, New Mexico, right on the border. There, children born in an American hospital to Mexican parents cross the border every single day to go to school in Columbus. The Columbus community has welcomed them with open arms for more than 60 years and despite the difficult and dangerous journey these children have to take every single day, Columbus Elementary School has nearly perfect attendance. The dedication and the profound understanding of the importance of educational opportunity I saw from both children and staff in Columbus is something that I will never, ever forget.

Lawmakers in Washington ought to see this community and then come back here and work together to reform immigration so families who just want to have a better life and contribute to America's economy can do that. No parent, no parent, should have to do a parent/teacher conference via Skype because mom and dad aren't ever allowed to visit their child's school, to attend a play, or to watch their child's musical performance.

Elsewhere in New Mexico, I went to Midway Elementary School in rural Socorro, where they are using technology to broaden the curriculum and personalize learning. They're not debating whether or not computers will replace teachers. That will simply never happen. That's another spin your wheels argument that you hear in the alternative universe.

In the real world outside of Washington bubble, schools are doing just what every organization and business and household in America is already doing. They're getting online and using the infinite resources of the internet to get smarter, faster. Technology can be a hugely important strategic tool as we strive to both increase equity and to raise the bar for all students.

We need to expand and accelerate that access. And that's why I'm so excited that the Federal Communications Commission, the FCC, has answered President Obama's call to vastly expand broadband access in schools.

In El Paso, Texas, I went to Transmountain High School, an early college high school, where most students are Hispanic and live below the poverty line. Transmountain has a STEM concentration. All students can complete an associate's degree by the end of their junior year and have the opportunity to attend UTEP during their senior year of high school. Lawmakers ought to go visit Transmountain and see how a school with high expectations and a commitment to rigor is literally transforming lives. They should visit the labs where 13 and 14 year old 9th graders are doing college level biology experiments and getting college credit while just a freshman in high school. Then, they should come

back here and give us the resources to recruit and prepare and hire and retain 100,000 new STEM educators to create many more programs like Transmountain's.

When students are both challenged and supported, it's amazing to see what they can do. Every student, every student in our country, should have the chance to earn college credits while they're in high school.

In Scottsdale, Arizona, some of my colleagues saw firsthand an example of a system working to improve outcomes for all students including students with disabilities. Through collaboration among general and special educators, as well as school psychologists, the district has significantly reduced the number of students identified as needing special needs.

I met an amazing young woman at the Marine Corps Air Station in Yuma, Arizona, who wants to be a special education teacher. She's a 17 year old senior and she's already gone to ten, ten, different schools. Service members in Yuma talked about the critical importance of having consistent, high educational standards as their families get reassigned across the country. For families that sacrifice so much for all of us, the least we can do for them, the least we can do, is to give their children a high quality education regardless of where they happen to be stationed.

I went to Castle Park Middle School in Chula Vista, California, where they are turning around a school by addressing chronic absenteeism. Attendance is up, parents and kids are more engaged, and are seeing the results in the classroom. Same children, same families, same socioeconomic challenges, same building, but very different expectations and great leadership are leading to wildly different outcomes.

Every student I met there was wearing a t-shirt with the name of a college on it. And one of those universities was Arizona State University that I visited a couple of days earlier for a forum on college costs. ASU is already doing exactly what President Obama has challenged the country to do. They're raising grad rates, they're increasing access, they're increasing quality, all while keeping tuition down at the same time. They're willing to be more transparent with costs and with outcomes and with other indicators to better help parents and students make decision about college.

Across the country today when student debt exceeds a trillion dollars, when young people are leaving school with six figure debts, and worst of all when they sometimes decide to forego college because they simply can't afford it, this is not just an educational crisis; this is an economic crisis. It's a threat to the American dream, the basic bargain that built this country. If you're willing to work hard, you can expect to have a decent wage that supports a family, a home, basic healthcare, a quality education for your kids and a secure retirement.

Back in 2009, all of those things were at risk and several still are. Median income has fallen since 1999 and wages have been flat for decades. Home values in many communities are still down or stagnant. College is too expensive and the prospects of a

secure retirement are fading for too many people. President Obama has said that he'll devote the remainder of his term to restoring that basic bargain and provide ladders to the middle class for struggling, hard working families.

And the best ladder of all to the middle class is a high quality education. Our North Star goal is for every student to graduate from high school and then acquire some kind of post secondary training or degree. Without that, quite frankly, their chances for a good job are slim to none. We know we still have a long, long way to go. Nearly one in four young people fails to finish high school on time. The dropout rate for those who actually go on to college is painfully high, and it's highest in our minority communities. About two-thirds of students who start at a community college have to take remedial classes at some point because they actually weren't ready. Only one in five African-Americans age 25 or older have a bachelor's degree or higher, and the numbers for Hispanics are even worse.

So for all our progress, things are still not fine for these young people. And the last thing, the last thing we should do, is to retreat. As we look to the months and years ago, here is the lay of the land. The most striking turned is that states and districts, principals and teachers and students are all moving forward without waiting for Washington. Many states are wisely investing more in preschool, in childcare and home visiting programs. States with federal early learning grants are leading the way on improving quality. And other states can learn from them and partner with them.

At the K-12 level, under the flexibility that was offered, state leaders on both sides of the aisle are moving ahead with higher standards, better systems of evaluation support, and more effective and comprehensive accountability. They're preparing for new assessments that'll better measure student learning and tell us the truth about where we as a country, where we are and what we need to do to get better.

I'm especially inspired by the emerging research and leadership and hard work around issues like resilience and grit and persistence, hard to measure qualities that educators know are probably just as important to student success as reading and math skills. Teachers are leading a much needed transformation of the entire profession. If we've learned one thing from other high performing countries is we must get better at recruiting and training our nation's teachers. We should also learn from successful training models, teaching training models, right here in the U.S. that are driving big gains. And we should pay teachers on par with other professions and reward those remarkable teachers who are producing outsized student gains and taking on the toughest of assignments.

In higher education, a number of universities, public and private, nonprofit and for profit, are creatively keeping down costs while increasing quality at the same time. They're focusing more on outcomes than on inputs. We all want to know, are they delivering value to the students who attend their institutions. Are those students getting good jobs once they leave? Are they repaying their student loans?

There's been an explosion of innovation around online learning and as we expand access, we must stay focused on quality and outcomes. Groundbreaking work is under way around competency based learning and we're partnering with universities at three experimental sites where institutions will award certificates to students based on what they actually know rather than on how long they sat in lecture halls. We need to make this shift, not just in higher ed., but in high schools and in our nation's middle schools as well.

Lastly, we must continue to build partnerships amongst community colleges and employers to forge a clearer path from school to work for millions of unemployed, under employed, and under skilled adults. They are eager for more fulfilling and rewarding careers. The fact that so many Americans are out of work in tough economic times while hundreds of thousands of high wage, high skilled jobs go unfilled is a market failure that hurts families, it hurts our country and our nation's economy.

Public/private partnerships must close the skills gap and community colleges are the centerpiece of that effort. So as this new school year gets under way, today I'm inviting any member of Congress to join me as I continue to travel around the country and highlight reforms that work. I invite journalists and bloggers and policy leaders as well. Let's go see for ourselves what is working and then let's bring these positive lessons back here to Washington. Let's talk to students and see what they want and what they need for their future, not for our present.

Right now, I believe our country faces stark choices. We can continue to play politics with the budget and the debt ceiling, or we can fund a federal government that Americans can count on. Congress can continue to treat education as an expense on the budget ledger, or they can see education as a critical investment for our nation winning the race for the future. Other countries get this, they're greatly expanding preschool and strengthening teacher preparation. We can look the other way while policies enrich the few at the expense of many, or we can shift resources to programs that can make a difference in the lives of our nation's children and families.

We can stand up to the ideologues and extremists in our own parties who promote the vision. We can all show real courage and choose to lead rather than follow. There are plenty of smart, good-hearted Republican leaders. There are many GOP governors doing the right thing. They know that education is the best bet for America. But where are the reasonable Republicans here in Washington who will stand up to the Tea Party, who will be that real Profile in Courage, who will make it safe for others to do the right thing for the country and provide all of our children with a strong start in preschool? There's nothing, nothing political about giving our three and four year olds a stronger start in life. The silence of our moderate friends always seems to trouble me more than the noise and nonsense from the extremists.

Similarly, the education community needs to put aside the rhetoric and disrespect and come together to push forward against the one common enemy that we must all fight together, and that enemy is academic failure. The American public is ignoring much of

the debate around school reform. They just want schools and education to keep improving. They're not letting the perfect become the enemy of the good. And they, they are the reason why I remain so hopeful.

I'm absolutely optimistic and inspired because of what is happening outside the beltway in schools, in colleges and universities, and in communities all across America. I'm optimistic because the teachers and principals that I have met, because of parents and community leaders, because of college presidents, and because of governors and state chiefs on both sides of the aisle. I'm optimistic, above all, because of the millions of students who come to school every single day. Many face extraordinary barriers and hardships, but they come back they feel safe, they feel engaged, and they feel loved and valued and inspired by their hard working teachers.

Our students hunger for the emotional and social and mental nourishment that comes from a great school. Public schools can be life changing places for our nation's children. At their best, they embody the core American values of ingenuity, creativity, and industry. They advance social mobility and economic opportunity for all. Public schools offer the hope and promise of a meaningful and rewarding life to every child who walks through their doors.

Our job, very simply, is to make our schools the best they can be. Thank you so much, and I'm happy to take your questions. (Applause)

MS. GREILING KEANE: Thank you, Secretary Duncan. I'd also like to tell the audience that if you have questions for our speaker, please write them on the cards that look like this that'll you find near your seats and pass those up here to the head table.

I'll start with topic A of the day, of course, is the shutdown. How will the lives of teachers and students be affected if the government shuts down?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Well, first my understanding is we have until midnight to solve this. And the one thing I've learned in Washington is where there's a will, there's a way and I desperately hope that the right thing happens before midnight tonight. And I am worried, but there's just simply no upside and the effects might not be felt immediately. But whether it's shutdown, whether it's sequester, none of these things are good for children, for schools, for families, for communities. Again, we need stability, we need investment, we need a functioning federal government and the dysfunction here right now is, frankly, pretty staggering.

MS. GREILING KEANE: This, of course, isn't the first time you've faced the threat of a shutdown. We've been to this brink before. What steps have you taken to try to mitigate the effects on education?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Well, first let me be very clear. On things like sequester, there is literally nothing I can do to mitigate those effects. So in reality because of sequester, we see thousands fewer children having access to Head Start, less money

for children with special needs, less money for children who live below the poverty line, Title I students, less money around military communities where our children's parents are protecting us overseas. Less money for Native American children, less money for work study to higher ed., and I just think as a country, we're cutting off our nose to spite our face. We either want the best educated workforce in the world, or we want one that isn't as good as other countries. And for me, that choice is pretty obvious.

Right now the immediate fear of shutdown, we'll do everything we can to try and be helpful to college students with grants and other things and make sure that money keeps flowing. But at the end of the day, we just need Congress to get its act together, democracy works and folks come together and compromise. That's what we need.

MS. GREILING KEANE: Moving on to Common Core, that effort was, of course, led by states. Yet, conservatives have called it another federal intrusion by the Obama Administration. Do you think that politically the administration support of it fuels the opposition?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Well, again, I think the fear of federal takeover is just the height of silliness. And these were standards that were designed by states, adopted voluntarily by states, being implemented by states. And I just come at this as a parent. My wife and I have two young children. I think like every parent, we want more for our children, not less. We don't want standards dummed down, I don't think any parent wants this. And if you look at lessons from states like Tennessee, just to take a moment, Tennessee, like many states, had dummed down standards. They were lying to children, to families for a long, long time.

Before Tennessee raised standards, and my numbers won't be exact, they were saying something like 90 percent of 4th graders were proficient in math, 90 percent. When Tennessee raised standards, they went from 90 percent to 29 percent and achievement gaps that were already large doubled. That's tough medicine. But guess what? It's the truth. And when we hide from the truth and we cover these things up with low standards, who are we helping? Who have we benefited other than politicians? We're hurting kids, we're hurting education, we're hurting our country.

So raising standards and challenging ourselves to hit those high standards, it's hard, it's tough. But this is not federal, state, local. This is all of us as parents saying, "We want our children to be able to compete in a globally competitive economy." We want them actually graduating from high school ready either for college or the world of work. In the year after they raised standards, Tennessee saw the biggest single year jump in scores that they'd seen in a long, long time. High standards, high expectations matter. States are showing tremendous courage driving this and we want to continue to support those states in making the right decisions educationally for their children, ultimately for our nation's economy.

MS. GREILING KEANE: Why do you think the standards have become such a lightning rod?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: I think it's political silliness. And again, folks who say we want to mind control folks, or data mining, or whatever the conspiracy theories are, it's simply not honest. And folks can choose to make political issues out of education or other things. But again, there should be nothing political about wanting more for our children. So, I think what we've seen across the states through all the noise on the far left and far right, what you actually see in the real world are the vast majority, the overwhelming majority of states, doing the really hard work of implementing much higher standards.

And again, because that isn't so noisy, it doesn't get covered. But it's been remarkable courage and leadership at the state level, at the district level, students working harder. And none of this is easy, there'll be bumps on the road, a lot of change, higher standards, new teacher and principal evaluation, next generation assessments coming, huge amount of change in a short amount of time. There'll be mistakes, there'll be bumps, we'll have to learn and adjust. But again in the real world, outside of here, amazing courage and leadership that we've seen. And that's why I'm really hopeful.

MS. GREILING KEANE: You talked about how in many places the Common Core standards have raised achievement. But in some places, parents are concerned that they're holding more advanced students back, especially in math. Do you think the standards discourage acceleration beyond grade level?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Absolutely not. And again, these are important conversations to have. Let's have conversations with facts in mind, not to avoid the facts. And not just raising standards, but this move to competency based education, not sitting in these chairs every day for a year to get a credit. But if you know algebra I not at the end of your freshman year, at the end of eighth grade, if you know algebra I in fifth grade or sixth grade or seventh grade, you should get credit for that and move on to the next thing.

And we're partnering with a number of colleges who are moving in this direction, more high schools and middle schools are starting to go here. So higher standards does nothing to hold people back. It actually raises the ceiling. And if we move again from competency to seat time, and technology can help us do that, we will continue to accelerate student learning.

MS. GREILING KEANE: Can you comment on the movement pushed by some teachers unions as well as governors and legislatures of both political parties, to put in place a moratorium on any assessment based teacher evaluations while Common Core is rolled out?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: I think it's been a really important conversation to have and I go out and listen to hundreds and hundreds of teachers around the country. And again, for all the noise, every survey, every poll of teachers says that 75 to 80 percent love the higher standards. And again, that story doesn't get covered enough

because there's been quite enough controversy and drama there. So teachers are absolutely embracing the higher standards. It's better for them, it's empowering them. They know it's better for their students.

But there's also some, I think, legitimate trepidation, some fear that if we do more in teacher evaluation to include student learning, there's some fear in this transition of how tough that's going to be. So what we said after much internal debate and conversation, was we said to states we would give you an option. If you want to take another year before you start to put that in place, that's fine. If you're moving forward, that's fine, too. So there's no value judgment on our side either way. There's no right or wrong answer. Again, we love this idea of holding states accountable to a higher bar but giving them the chance to be flexible and creative in how they hit that higher bar. We will know very shortly what states are moving forward on the same time frame, what states what an additional year. And we're going to learn from all of them and continue to partner with them and work together.

MS. GREILING KEANE: Moving on to higher education, what are the administration's biggest priorities in reauthorizing the Higher Education Act? And are we ready for reauthorization given all the debate and flux in the higher education sector on everything from accreditation to curriculum to technology?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: So whether it's HEA, whether it's Perkins, whether it's ESEA, we've been ready to partner with Congress and move forward in a bipartisan way. I think what we're collectively focused on are a couple of things. We want to continue to challenge universities to keep costs down. We want to challenge states to increase their investment, and many states cut back during the recession. They have to come back in and move away from that investment. We want universities not just to keep costs down but increase access. And we want to make sure it's not just access to folks who are graduating in the back end, it's around attainment.

So we stand ready, willing and able to work with Congress on any of these, whether it's HEA, whether it's Perkins, whether it's WEA [?], No Child Left Behind is desperately broke and we want Congress to fix that. But for Congress to do some work, a government shutdown today isn't part of that solution.

MS. GREILING KEANE: The President has called for a push for all Americans to have at least one year of higher education. What are you seeing in terms of progress in that direction?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: I'm going to be really clear. I think that's just a bare minimum. If students drop out of high school today, they are basically condemned to poverty and social failure. There are no good jobs, none, in the economy for a high school dropout. If you just have a high school diploma, there are virtually no jobs. So some form of higher education, four year university, two year community college, trade, technical vocational training, some form of higher ed has to be the goal for every single young person.

We are starting to see some progress. We've had a slight increase in college graduation rates. We're seeing significant increases in enrollment amongst both African-Americans and particularly in the Latino community. But we have, frankly, a long, long way to go. One generation ago, we led the world in college graduation rates, we are now 12th. It's really interesting. We didn't drop, we just flat lined. We stagnated, we got complacent as a nation and other countries are just out-educating us and out-innovating us. And for us to lead the world in college graduation rates again by the year 2020, as a nation we have to get better and accelerate those rates. We have to get better faster.

MS. GREILING KEANE: You just said that one year should be the minimum, and you talked in your speech about the problem of students who start college dropping out at alarming rates. Why, then, is one year the administration's policy goal?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Let me be clear, that's the minimum goal. And again, whether it's four year, two year, trade, technical, vocational, some additional education beyond that. And one of the real barriers right now, as I talked about in my speech, is college cost. And I have to say, everywhere I go, whether it's flying on an airplane or going to the dry cleaners or going to the grocery store, hard working parents come up and say the cost of college is crushing them.

I'll never forget, I met one-- a little while back-- one young girl who was a senior in high school in Iowa. We were doing an event in Iowa. She came up, she happened to have a brother who's a twin and she said her parents are trying to decide which twin to send to college because they couldn't afford to send both. No family, no family, should be put in that kind of situation. It's absolutely heartbreaking.

And so we have to really challenge, again, universities to keep costs down. There's some that are doing a phenomenal job there, but again, trillion dollars in debt out there. College has to be attainable, it has to be affordable for hard working middle class families. So we want to continue to invest at the federal level. One of the things I'm most proud of is we got an additional \$40 million for Pell grants without going back to taxpayers for a nickel. We went from six million Pell recipients to nine million Pell recipients.

But to be really clear, this is about shared responsibility. We can't do it by ourselves. States have invest and reinvest, colleges have to do their part to keep costs down, increase access and make sure-- increase quality and make sure it's not just enrollment, it's graduation at the back end.

MS. GREILING KEANE: What is the role of the federal government in trying to keep college costs down?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: We're working really hard on that. And one thing the President's challenged us about a yeah from now is to come up with a college rating system. And we want to start to provide much more transparent data to young people

and their families around the country. I think it's so hard, particularly for first generation college goers, to try and navigate the college process. What's a grant, what's a loan, what's the one year cost, what's the four year cost, what's the right major, what are the job prospects for someone in my major, what are graduation rates? It's a huge amount of basic information that's just extraordinarily difficult for families to have access to.

So I'm a big believer in transparency. We want to get much more transparency out there. We want to come out with a rating system that allows parents to sort of make more informed decisions. And ultimately, what we want to do is we want to see good actors who are doing the right thing receive more federal dollars. And we want to see actors who aren't doing the right thing receive less.

Two other quick points on this. We put out, right now in the federal government, about \$150 billion, with a B, \$150 billion each year in grants and loans. All of that, to date, all of that isn't based upon inputs, not on outcomes. And so I would say we've been part of the problem and we need to challenge that.

The second thing I'll say is when I led the Chicago public schools, we tracked our high school graduates very, very closely. And we saw students with identical GPAs, identical SAT and ACT scores, going to different local universities. And some were graduating at rates of 75, 80 percent, and some were like at 15 to 20 percent. There were huge, huge disparities in outcomes. And we started, quite frankly, to steer our students towards those universities who had support programs and mentoring programs and summer bridge programs and built a culture not just around access, but around completion. And we started to steer them away from other universities who didn't take that responsibility seriously.

We had the best system of higher education in the world, 7,000, more than 7,000 institutions; two year, four year, public, private, nonprofit, for profit, faith based, whatever it might be. Best system in the world, but it's a very inefficient marketplace. Parents aren't able to make informed decisions. Students don't have enough information. And so we think we can help through transparency and starting to move resources to the good actors. Hopefully, we can start to put parents in a much more empowered position.

MS. GREILING KEANE: This questioner asks about taking a market based approach to this problem. Would limits on the amount of money college students can borrow help stop the increases in college tuition?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: We're open to all these ideas. And as we come into thinking about this rating system, we're doing it with great, great humility and we're going to spend lots of time traveling the country. My team, folks at the White House, listening to good ideas from any place. And I'm going to be really clear. If you're borrowing money, but have a great likelihood of graduating and a great likelihood of getting a good job once you're done, that's actually a pretty good investment.

But if you're borrowing money and you're very low prospects of getting a job, or you're actually at very low prospects of graduating, that's not a good proposition. So for me, it's less about whether you're borrowing or not. It's whether that's the right investment for yourself and for your family. If going to college is helping you climb the economic ladder and enter the middle class, that's great to have some debt. Where you end up in a worse financial position than when you started, that's not fair to young people.

MS. GREILING KEANE: What about addressing for profit colleges? There's been a lot of reporting in recent years about the enormous debt that some students there rack up. Is that maybe a focus of the administration?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: We have focused very significantly on for profit, if folks haven't noticed, and done a lot through the gainful employment work. But let me be really, really clear. There's nothing inherently good or bad in my mind about a for profit university, or any other university. I just want to know, are they increasing access? Are there good completion rates, and are folks able to get a good job at the back end? And the best for profits, I think, do a fantastic job of helping struggling individuals and single moms and people who are retraining and retooling in green energy jobs, IT jobs, advanced manufacturing and healthcare. The best ones do a great job of increasing upward mobility.

The worst ones, I think, are a huge part of the problem. And again, where you are leaving folks with huge debt, when they are in worse economic positions than when they started, and again, these are often folks who are struggling already. It's absolutely immoral and we can't support that. So for me, there's no sector that's good or bad. We want to look at the individual actions of each one. Those who are doing a great job, we'd love for them to get more students and grow and prosper. Those who are doing a bad job, we think having taxpayers continue to subsidize them doesn't make sense.

MS. GREILING KEANE: Looking at the other end of the educational spectrum, what has the administration done or what does it plan to do to reach out to Republican Congress members to support the President's universal preschool proposal?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: So my team and I have been out traveling the country on this one. And it's amazing to me to see the absolute consensus everywhere I go. And we're doing these fantastic events at early childhood sites where you have state attorney generals, law enforcement, you have admirals and generals retired from the military, you have CEOs, you have faith based leaders, you have parents all coming together to say this is the right thing to do.

As I said in my speech, you're seeing Republican and Democratic governors investing in tough economic times, investing more in preschool. In fact, there are more Republican governors than Democrats who are making this investment. So we are talking to many members of Congress, House and Senate. As I talked about in my speech, we would love to see those profiles of courage emerge and say there's nothing political about

helping our babies get off to a good start. That's not done yet, but I remain hopeful we can do that.

But last two things on early childhood education. It's just sort of amazing to me, young children who don't have access who come from disadvantaged communities, the average child from a poor area starts kindergarten at five years old a year to 14 months behind, starts. And we are constantly playing catch up, and we don't play catch up very well. We have to get out of the catch up business. And to have our babies start on a level playing field is arguably the best thing we can do.

Dr. James Heckman, who's a Nobel Prize winning economist at the University of Chicago, has studied these long-term investments, talked about the seven to one ROI, talked about where there's access to high quality pre-K, less teenage pregnancy, less crime, less dropouts, more high school graduates, more college graduates, more folks entering the world of work. This is the best investment we can make.

Final thing I'll say, I went to Minnesota recently and it's interesting. Minnesota Governor Dayton is doing the right thing. He's increasing investment by about 30, 40 million dollars in early childhood education. And it's fascinating. Minnesota is one of the higher performing states nationally in most K-12 assessments. So, overall, highest performing but has maybe the largest achievement gap, or one of the worst achievement gaps in the country. Minnesota also has a 30,000 child waiting list for early childhood education. So that's 30,000 children and parents desperately wanting to get their babies off to a good start who don't have that opportunity.

And I draw a direct line between the lack of access to high quality early childhood education and those achievement gaps that happen on the side. So what we just want to do is partner with states. This wouldn't be any kind of federal mandate, where states are investing more to increase access and make sure it's high quality. We want to get children off that waiting list. And whether it's 30,000 there, whether it's over 10,000 in Massachusetts, whether it's about 8,000 in Georgia, everywhere I go, everywhere I go, there's a waiting list. We as a country need to come together to give our children a chance to get off to a great start.

MS. GREILING KEANE: We are almost out of time, but before asking one last question, I've got a couple of housekeeping matters to take care of. First of all, I'd like to remind you about our upcoming speakers. On October 18th, we have George Takei, otherwise known as Mr. Sulu of *Star Trek* fame and also a gay rights activist. On November 5th, we have Goldie Hawn, the actress and founder of the Goldie Hawn Foundation. And on November 11th, we have Walt Bettinger, President and CEO of the Charles Schwab Corporation.

Secondly, I would like to present our guest with the traditional National Press Club coffee mug. I think you may have quite a collection of these by now. (Applause)

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Well, thanks a lot.

MS. GREILING KEANE: And hang on, one last question. We want to know, take us behind the scenes, what's it like when you go to your children's parent-teacher conferences?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: It is absolutely terrifying for me and my wife. And you sit in the little bitty chairs and you desperately hope your kids have done okay. And most of the time, they have, but it's a very humbling experience and our kids are blessed to go to some fantastic local public schools and have some amazing teachers. And as parents, we're just trying to do the right thing and partner with our children's schools and with their teachers. But it's nerve-wracking, to say the least.

MS. GREILING KEANE: Thank you, Secretary Duncan, for coming today. I'd also like to thank the National Press Club staff including our National Press Club Journalism Institute and Broadcast Operation Center staff for helping organize today's event. Finally, here's a reminder. You can find more information about the Press Club on our website. You can also order a copy of today's program on the site at www.press.org. Thank you, we are adjourned. (Sounds gavel.) (Applause)

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