

# “The best ideas me or anyone else in



**GAIL CONNELLY:** Secretary Duncan, how would you characterize your vision and goals for the education of our nation’s children and youth?

**Arne Duncan:** Our goal is easy to articulate and hard to get there. It’s to make sure every child in this country has access to a world-class education. Race, social and economic status, zip code, neighborhood shouldn’t matter. Every child today desperately needs and deserves a chance to get a great education.

There are no jobs for high school dropouts, and there are almost no jobs for young people who just have a high school diploma. Some form of higher education has to be the goal of every single child in this country. Our collective job is to get students ready to take that next step in their education journey.

**The current focus of the national school improvement effort is on the nation’s 5 percent lowest achieving schools. What supports or rewards are available to the majority of principals who lead successful schools?**

We want to provide much more flexibility—to give folks a lot more room and ability to be creative at the local level, and get the federal government off their backs. We can’t micromanage 95,000 schools.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently met with NAESP Executive Director Gail Connelly to discuss the Obama administration’s vision, initiatives, and goals for America’s elementary and middle-level education and the impact on the nation’s principals. Their conversation follows:

# will never come from Washington, D.C.”

A Conversation With Secretary of Education **Arne Duncan**

The best ideas in education will never come from me or anyone else in Washington, D.C. They're always going to come from a local level. We want to empower local educators to have a chance to make a difference. So much creativity and innovation was stifled [with NCLB]. We want to fix that as we move forward with reauthorization [of ESEA]. We want the spotlight on success and excellence—great teachers, great principals, great schools, great districts, great states are beating the odds every day, often under trying circumstances. For all of our challenges, we've never had more examples of high-performance schools. Our challenge as a country is to take to scale what's worked and learn from those processes. We have a golden opportunity to do that.

**Research shows that educational leadership can have strong positive effects on student learning. What's your view of the role principals have in improving student achievement?**

Nothing is more important. There's no such thing as a high-performing school without a great principal. It is impossible. You simply can't overstate their importance in driving student achievement, in attracting and retaining great talent to the school.

I've said repeatedly that there are many areas where the Department

of Education has been part of the problem. One area is a huge underinvestment in principal leadership. That's why we're asking for a five-fold increase in funding to support principals and principal development. That, by far, is our biggest "ask" from Congress. Principal leadership is so critically important, and we want to support principals as they grow and develop. We want to do everything we can to help those great leaders at the local level make a difference in their communities.

**What role does principal evaluation have on the future of the profession?**

All of us want really good, honest, comprehensive feedback as to how we're doing in our jobs. In far too many places, principal evaluation doesn't help principals learn and grow. There are examples of success, and we need to learn from them, but this should always be determined at the local level.

I've talked to many principals who don't feel that their evaluation is helping them get better or is meaningful. We need to take this on openly and honestly. We can't do enough to recognize, reward, and encourage those phenomenal principals and those who may not be world-class yet, but are getting better every year. We have to do a much better job supporting them and

encouraging them to improve.

When evaluations don't work for adults, they definitely don't work for children or the education system. We need to be willing to challenge the status quo and learn where we have those examples of success. This is an area where we have a lot of work to do together.

**Although the jobs bill that passed last summer will help keep educators employed and will provide some financial relief, principals still struggle to find sufficient resources to manage the school, support teachers, and help children learn. What advice could you offer principals who must balance ever-shrinking budgets with ever-growing expectations?**

We were thrilled to get the jobs bill passed. Many folks kept telling me I was wasting my time but the need is desperate out there. I've talked to countless educators who have been working for three and four decades who have never seen things as tough as they are today. So, the jobs bill was a huge step in the right direction. But even with that, in many schools around the country, principals have never been so challenged to do more with less. That's the honest reality.

In tough and lean budget times, it's imperative that all of us—principals, parents, school superintendents,

school boards—are strategic and smart, making hard decisions, figuring out what investments have the biggest impact on student achievement, and continuing to support those investments. It also forces us to examine the things that might sound good or look good on paper, but really aren't changing students' lives. The hard thing is to stop doing things. I think so often in education, we're good at doing things and less good at stopping things that don't have an impact.

Many school districts have been cutting five, six, seven years in a row, so these cuts come on top of a tough situation. There's a feeling that we've cut the fat and are into bone. We really need to determine which investments are changing student lives and which aren't.

We also need to have transparency in communications to help the school community understand the financial challenges and the realities. The more

## There are many areas where the Department of Education has been part of the problem. One is a huge underinvestment in principal leadership.

the public understands how tough things are, the more sympathetic they're going to be and the more they're going to be education's supporters.

We need to encourage principals to go into the toughest underserved communities. We're putting a lot of incentives on the table to get the hardest working, most committed

principals and teachers to those communities. We talk about replacing principals but it's important to remember that we're talking about just that bottom 5 percent, not the [remaining] 95 percent. If a principal is new to a school and in the process of turning it around, we want him or her to stay. But when a principal has been in one of the bottom 5 percent

### GLOBAL ONLINE

## Enhance your Career in Education with Cal U's 100% Online Programs

- Administrative Program for Principals
- Superintendent Letter of Eligibility

California University of Pennsylvania, with more than 150 years of experience in higher education, offers two dynamic, 100% online programs created for you, the busy working professional looking to advance your career in education, but unable to fit traditional classroom study into your schedule.

All courses are taught completely online, in a cohort format, by experienced school administrators. You will form a professional relationship with members of your cohort as you begin and complete the program together. You can communicate with your professors and your cohort any time through online chats, bulletin boards and e-mail. Both part-time, completely online programs provide a personalized approach in meeting your needs whether you are seeking a principal's certificate, a master's degree in education, the superintendent letter or simply a way to enhance your teaching and leadership skills.

To find out more about these two programs, or any of Cal U's Global Online programs, contact us at **866-595-6348**, e-mail us at [calugo@calu.edu](mailto:calugo@calu.edu) or visit [www.calu.edu](http://www.calu.edu).

California University of Pennsylvania is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of College and Schools and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. Pennsylvania Department of Education-approved programs.

California University of Pennsylvania  
Building Character. Building Careers.  
[www.calu.edu](http://www.calu.edu)

A proud member of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education.

# CALU

for eight, 10, or 12 years, and the school is flat-lining or going south, we need to have an open and honest conversation about that. We've become much more creative and innovative at how we get the best principals and teachers to the communities that need them the most. Historically, there's been lot of disincentives to that and very few incentives. We want to flip that on its head.

**Some critics of No Child Left Behind perceive it to be a "test and punish" law. With the push to reauthorize ESEA, educators are eager to see a focus on provisions that reflect the true complexities of strengthening teaching and learning. What proposed changes are essential to ESEA to enable that focus?**

There's a lot broken with No Child Left Behind. I lived on the other side of the law for seven and a half years as CEO of Chicago Public Schools, so I have first-hand experience. NCLB was far too punitive—there were 50 ways to fail and very few, if any, rewards for success. It was very prescriptive, very top down. When I ran the Chicago schools, I almost had to sue the Department of Education for the right to tutor students. That was absolutely crazy. Luckily we won the right but we had literally tens of thousands of disadvantaged children who wanted to stay after school for more help, and the federal government was telling me I couldn't do it. It made no sense.

So NCLB is very punitive, very prescriptive, very top down. There's no question that it led to a dumbing down of standards across the country. One of the biggest complaints I've heard everywhere—urban, rural, suburban—is that it led to a narrowing of the curriculum.

We have to reward excellence, to shine the spotlight on success all over the country. As I mentioned, answers are never going to come from Washington. We are going to hold folks accountable for results but give them room to be creative and innovative.

## A FAST TRACK TO A TRADITIONAL ED.D.

Seton Hall University's nationally recognized, accelerated doctoral program will allow you to complete your studies in just 10 weekends and two, four-week sessions over two years. In fact, more than 300 K-12 administrators in 28 states and six foreign countries have already successfully earned their degrees and achieved career advancement.

**Now accepting applications for the April 2011 cohort.**

**Loans are available to cover the entire cost of the program regardless of financial need.**



"Combined with superior teaching, strong curriculum, and an emphasis on contemporary issues, the Seton Hall experience will permit you to forge ties with a premier institution and create lasting personal and professional relationships with colleagues from all over the world."

Sandra DeLuca, Ed.D. '09  
Director of Guidance  
Metuchen Schools, NJ

For more information, call 1-800-313-9833, e-mail [execedd@shu.edu](mailto:execedd@shu.edu) or go to [www.shu.edu/go/execedd](http://www.shu.edu/go/execedd)



400 South Orange Avenue  
South Orange, NJ 07079  
[www.shu.edu](http://www.shu.edu)

FAST TRACK

## Do the Math. Help Save Lives.

**You could win a free Kindle!**

**Call 1-800-FUNBOOK (386-2665)**  
(8 a.m.–6 p.m. CT)

*Math-A-Thon* is a free, fun math program for students grades K-8 to raise money for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital to fight childhood cancer. Through this program, students build essential math skills through a series of engaging, standards-based math activities developed by Scholastic.



**For more information,  
call 1-800-FUNBOOK or visit  
[www.mathathon.org](http://www.mathathon.org) today.**

St. Jude patient Andrea  
Age 4  
Wilms tumor



©2010 ALSAC/St. Jude Children's Research Hospital (04535)



St. Jude Children's Research Hospital®, founded by the late entertainer Danny Thomas, is proud to be ranked the No. 1 children's cancer hospital in the nation by *U.S. News & World Report*.

# NAESP: Your Champion in Washington, D.C.

**N**AESP is pleased to feature this conversation with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in *Principal*, the first NAESP has conducted with the sitting secretary of education since September 2000. In the intervening decade, education has experienced a sea change, with principals often feeling buffeted by waves of “reforms” that didn’t always acknowledge their wisdom, experience, or successes in improving our nation’s schools and making a real difference for all children.

Duncan’s vision, views, and policies are critically important to your students, school community, and careers. This interview gives you the opportunity to learn more about the secretary’s views—first hand and unfiltered.

Just as important, the secretary is open to learning more about NAESP’s advocacy role, as we champion your views, passions, and expertise. Consequently, NAESP has taken great care to build a partnership with the Department of Education based on civil discourse: We support the department’s positions when they serve your interests, and we present vigorous, but respectful, disagreement when they do not, offering instead constructive and informed alternatives. (For example, we take exception with the department’s policies related to the four “reform models” that result in the automatic dismissal of principals in underperforming schools and to the draft definitions of “effective” and “highly effective” principals. See “Postscript” on page 64 of this issue.) You can find our position statements at [www.naesp.org/advocacy](http://www.naesp.org/advocacy).

One single goal is our touchstone in our dialog with the department: The voice of principals must be heard and heeded in the current national discourse. For that to occur, NAESP must engage in this discussion as a knowledgeable, responsible, and strategic advocate. Being “at the table” allows us to continue amplifying your collective voice on issues of vital importance to you, and we have made significant progress on your behalf. In all matters, we are your champion.

**Gail Connelly**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NAESP

Local principals know what’s best for their children and communities, and we want to give them much more room to operate. College- and career-related standards for every single child are going to become the norm, and soon. This takes great courage and leadership at the local level.

One of the things I’m most passionate about is that every single child desperately needs and deserves a well-rounded curriculum. Yes, reading and math are important. So are science, social studies, and financial literacy. So are environmental literacy, dance, drama, art, music, and physical education. And I’m a big fan of recess. We can bring back recess. Please quote me on that. I’m serious.

We can fix the things that are broken and move in the right direction through the reauthorization process.

### **Please share your thoughts about early childhood education.**

Perhaps the best investment we can make is early childhood education—getting our babies off to a great start and getting them into kindergarten ready to learn and read. Long term, the most important thing we can do is to close achievement gaps. We’re partnering in unprecedented ways with the Department of Health and Human Services, hoping that collaboration at the federal level—which hasn’t been there historically—will be mirrored at the state and the local levels. We are working extraordinarily hard, particularly for disadvantaged children, to give them a chance to get off to a great start in life.

Even the best kindergarten teacher in the world now teaches in a class where some children read fluently and other children don’t know their letters or colors. Some children literally don’t know the front of a book from the back. Some don’t know their name—they’ve been called a nickname all their life. I don’t know how the best kindergarten teacher can teach to that wide disparity. I saw it at my daughter’s kindergarten class in Chicago. So the more we can level the

playing field, the more children can enter kindergarten ready to learn and read, with pre-literacy and socialization skills intact.

### **What final words can you share to keep principals energized and passionate about the capacity of education to sustain our society and enable our country to remain globally competitive?**

Nothing is more important than leadership. Principals are CEOs. They’re instructional leaders, they manage sometimes multimillion-dollar budgets, they manage a staff, they work with the community. We’ve never asked so much of them. But there’s nothing more important because the stakes have never been higher for our country.

Today we have a dropout rate that is unacceptable. We’ve fallen from first in the world in college graduates to 12th. That’s not something any of us can and should be proud of. And a 25 percent dropout rate is morally unacceptable and economically unsustainable. We have to educate our way to a better economy. If we can get our children off to a great start in primary and elementary schools, I’m absolutely confident that we can again lead the world. Our children are as smart, talented, committed, entrepreneurial, and innovative as children anywhere in the world. We have to give them a real chance to be successful. If we don’t, we put our country in great peril.

The stakes are high, but we have great leadership and great principals—folks who see this profession as a calling. I’m convinced we are going to have great success in every school, but only with great leadership in every school. I just can’t overstate how important the principal is in creating a climate in which adults want to stay and children can fulfill their potential. So I wanted to thank all elementary principals. I cannot thank them enough.

**Thank you, Secretary Duncan.**