AN UNSOLICITED PROPOSAL FOR THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

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We often treat education in the United States as a utility; i.e., we take it for granted the way we take for granted that the lights will work when we flip a switch. As long as it appears to be working, most of us give little thought to education, and it only takes a little interruption to arouse a great deal of attention. The Department of Education could and should help this vital national "utility" run better and produce uniformly excellent results, but to do so it should do more than collect and disseminate research, and more than dole out Federal funds for various programs.

With that in mind, we offer this proposal for how the Department of Education could lead by example: the Department of Education should establish, staff, and operate a charter school in metropolitan D.C. and make it the best school in the country.

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The most visible challenge for Education Secretary Arne Duncan, when he was confirmed by the Senate on Inauguration Day 2009, was how to deal with the "No Child Left Behind" Act. Many people have called for abolishing NCLB, not because they would prefer to leave children behind—so we must assume—but because they disagree with one part or another of the program. But this proposal does not depend on legislation like NCLB; instead, it concentrates on one way the Department of Education can improve what should be the core functions of education: teaching and learning.

To that end, we repeat and emphasize: the Department of Education should establish, staff, and operate a charter school in metropolitan D.C. *and make it the best school in the country.*

Surely the D.C. State Superintendent of Education—and who outside the Beltway knew the tiny District of Columbia has a State office as well as a local office to oversee their schools?—would welcome a Federally-funded school that would relieve a small portion of their teaching load. If they balk at the notion, and argue that their jurisdiction over the Federal District trumps the interests of the Federal department, the new school could open its doors to students from Northern Virginia or Maryland. We hope, with the interests of the children in mind, they would not oppose the idea.

But how would this new school be different from any other school?

First, it would be staffed by D.C.-area Education Department personnel, many of whom presumably are experts in the field and skilled teachers. (It

would be regrettable if the majority of employees of the Education Department did not have successful backgrounds in education.) These teachers—along with a principal and a modicum of support personnel—would not be penalized in any way by being selected for this duty; rather, they would continue to draw their current General Schedule salaries during their service in the new school. We submit that the offices and programs in which they now work should largely be unaffected: Surely an organization of 4,200 employees could spare three or four dozen—around 1% of the department—to serve as grade-level teachers for K-6, subject matter and specialty teachers for higher grades, and a small support staff, without hurting its effectiveness too much. As to the mechanics of the idea, giving new responsibilities to current employees and shifting around some of the department's resources should be possible even if they entail some bureaucratic difficulty. Indeed, it may be possible to free personnel to teach by eliminating one or more of the redundant, outdated, or burdensome programs the department administers. And perhaps the D.C. "state" and local offices could be induced to cooperate in the venture, since they probably have some redundancy between their respective operations: that could free up a qualified teacher or two.

Second, and despite the Education Department's emphasis on conducting and collecting research, this school would not be a "teaching laboratory"—its children would not be lab rats upon which every new pedagogical theory must be tried. Instead, it should be a place where only the most effective, time-proven methods are used to present and reinforce the basics, and where art, music, language and a small number of electives round out the academic experience.

Third, the school would be designed with a unified, coherent curriculum in mind: one that begins with an appreciation of the skills and knowledge a graduate should possess, and sets up each grade level in a sequence to achieve that end. A good start would be E.D. Hirsch's series *What Your [Nth] Grader Should Know*, which would have the virtue of eliminating the need for lengthy staff debate and thereby allow more time for teachers to develop lesson plans to present the material. Better still would be to combine that basic curriculum with a frank discussion with the universities, colleges, and technical schools to which the graduates are likely to go, and the businesses likely to employ them; and, once it is clear what skills and knowledge those graduates really need to succeed, to ensure the school provides the right sequence of learning to achieve those ends.

Selecting students for this model school shouldn't be too difficult: many parents would like to get their children out of the schools they currently attend, and a combination of parent application and random selection should work fine. Once selected, however, the students should be evaluated and placed in the grade they are prepared to handle whether it is higher or lower than the grade they just left. Once enrolled, students should be evaluated

frequently to ensure they make sufficient progress. The evaluations should be tied to the curriculum, and freely available to everyone in the school: a sixth grade teacher, for example, should be able to monitor the progress of the fifth graders she is likely to teach next year. In fact, such free exchange should be encouraged: The more the teachers in this or any school can collaborate without having to endure onerous bureaucratic burdens, the more likely the school will succeed.

Could this proposal be enacted—a venue secured, teachers selected, curriculum built, lesson plans written, and students accepted—by the start of the 2010-11 school year? With enough enthusiasm and determination, and with a willingness to sidestep, jump over, or bulldoze through the usual bureaucratic obstacles, yes. If the educational leadership continues with business as usual, twice as much time would not be half enough.

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What are the possible outcomes of this proposal? If the school educates its students well, and they move on to higher levels or immediate employment with the confidence that comes from competence, we may be prepared to use the school as a standard for the nation, with its curriculum and methods available to be adapted (not mandated or blindly adopted) by any other school. In that case, education in the U.S. could well become a much more reliable "utility" serving the good of the nation by serving its students well. If not—if the school fails its students—we may want to reconsider the leadership role of the Department of Education.

This proposal would allow the Education Department to demonstrate its expertise and capitalize on the experience of its employees who currently languish in administrative duties they probably do not enjoy; in addition, it would make the department much more than an arbiter of disputes or a distributor of government largesse. No great undertaking is without risk of failure, but in this case the risk should be small: the nation's education leaders should be able to operate a school—and even more than one—and make it the absolute best. The question is whether the current leadership might be willing to take such a risk; unfortunately, we probably already know the answer.

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