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A Profile of Arne Duncan TRANSCRIPT

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JUDY WOODRUFF: Next, the new secretary of education and what's on his plate. President Obama earlier this week called for big changes in education. The NewsHour's special correspondent for education, John Merrow, has a look at how the president's point-man plans to approach that.

JOHN MERROW, NewsHour Correspondent: This time last year, former pro basketball player Arne Duncan was leading the Chicago public schools and occasionally playing basketball with friends, including then-Senator Barack Obama. A lot has changed since then.

BARACK OBAMA, President of the United States: I think we are putting together the best basketball-playing cabinet in American history.

JOHN MERROW: Thanks to President Obama, Arne Duncan has the opportunity to become the most powerful U.S. secretary of education ever.

ARNE DUNCAN, Secretary of Education: This was not something I aspired to do. Frankly, were it anyone but him, I wouldn't probably do it.

JOHN MERROW: The two developed a close relationship in Chicago, both on and off the court.

ARNE DUNCAN: I took him to good schools; I took him to tough schools. So we've had a chance to work together for years.

JOHN MERROW: That bond, plus an unprecedented level of federal education spending, means Duncan could have a real impact on a troubled public system where nationally 3 out of 10 ninth-graders fail to graduate.

ARNE DUNCAN: There's a huge opportunity in the stimulus package to reward great behavior and to get folks thinking differently about how we best serve children. My simple rule is, if it's good for children, we're going to do more of it; if it's not good for children, we're going to do less.

More discretionary funding

JOHN MERROW: He makes it sound easy, but it won't be. The stimulus package allocates over \$100 billion for education, more than doubling the department's budget. Even more important is how much of that money -- over \$5 billion -- has no strings attached. He can spend it to push for the changes he wants. That's real power.

CHRISTOPHER CROSS, Former Assistant Secretary of Education: He has more resources to do things than anybody in history has ever had.

JOHN MERROW: Christopher Cross, a Washington veteran, knows how things work in the nation's capital.

CHRISTOPHER CROSS: Generally, the secretary of education has almost no discretionary money. If the secretary would have \$100 million or \$200 million -- not billion, but million -- that's a lot of money. All of a sudden now, he's got in excess of \$5 billion, and that's more discretionary money. That's bigger than the budget for the old U.S. Office of Education was in the early 1970s.

JOHN MERROW: His discretionary is larger than the whole budget?

CHRISTOPHER CROSS: Yes, that's right. And this is the first time that the federal government to my knowledge in education has really had money to incentivize action rather than to force compliance with action.

JOHN MERROW: It's a carrot?

CHRISTOPHER CROSS: It's a carrot, right, exactly.

JOHN MERROW: Duncan has made it clear that he intends to use that \$5 billion to pay the best teachers more and to pay extra to those willing to teach in our worst schools. He also wants higher pay for math and science teachers and more charter schools.

Also on his agenda, early education programs for poor kids. This commitment has its roots in his childhood.

ARNE DUNCAN: My mother's been running an inner-city tutoring program since 1961, and it was an absolutely formative experience for me. And what I saw from the earliest ages was children beat the odds because my mother and others like her were in their lives.

Changing 'No Child Left Behind'

JOHN MERROW: Duncan says he moved the system forward during his seven

years as superintendent in Chicago.

ARNE DUNCAN: We dramatically improved teacher quality. I fundamentally believe that talent matters tremendously in this business. We went from about 11 National Board-certified teachers to 1,200. You'd look at seven years in a row of increasing test scores and increasing graduation rates, reducing the dropout rate.

JOHN MERROW: But he was not successful at raising student scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often called the nation's report card. Chicago still ranks near the bottom among major cities.

ARNE DUNCAN: NAEP scores we're nowhere near satisfied, but we're looking at improvement. And, again, that's something I really want to focus on here. I think we came a long way, but the work is absolutely unfinished.

JOHN MERROW: One of Duncan's first challenges is to work with Congress to reauthorize No Child Left Behind, the Bush administration's signature education law that gave the federal government unprecedented power over public schools. As Chicago superintendent, Duncan had issues with the law.

ARNE DUNCAN: There were some real practical implementation issues -- some intended, some unintended -- that I think we have a huge chance to do better on now.

RANDI WEINGARTEN, President, American Federation of Teachers: He has a very big job. No Child Left Behind didn't create the help that it should and just essentially became a punishment law with a lot of different sanctions.

JOHN MERROW: Randi Weingarten is president of the American Federation of Teachers, a national teachers' union.

RANDI WEINGARTEN: I think they focus far too much on the assessments. So test prep drove an agenda, which ultimately narrowed curriculum, which ultimately didn't create the robustness that you need in an education.

Working on a local level

JOHN MERROW: Many school superintendents, including these four selected as the nation's best by the American Association of School Administrators, were unhappy with what they saw as federal interference into a local issue.

STU SILBERMAN, Superintendent: I think there was an overexertion of power with the No Child Left Behind, because there were things in there that I know that superintendents across this country and teachers believed that were the wrong things to do. We had to deal with those issues or lose our funding.

JOHN MERROW: Now some superintendents expect things to be different.

BEVERLY HALL, Superintendent: I was very pleased because Arne is -- or was -- an urban superintendent. He knows the challenges that we face, but he also knows some of the solutions that we believe make sense and would help to move the needle in terms of outcomes for the students in urban areas.

STU SILBERMAN: He's just been in the trenches with us, and he knows exactly what it is that we've been dealing with.

JOHN MERROW: Duncan says he recognizes the importance of local control, even as he oversees \$160 billion in federal education spending.

ARNE DUNCAN: I think Washington has an extraordinarily important role to play, maybe more so than ever before. But I would argue states have to behave in very, very different ways, and they have a critically important role.

I think there can't be one power center. I think we all have to work together, collaboratively in very different ways to get where we need to go.

JOHN MERROW: But you are going to be writing the checks. That's power.

ARNE DUNCAN: You see it as power; I see it as partnership.

JOHN MERROW: Do we need national standards?

ARNE DUNCAN: I think we need to look at it. I think the idea of 50 states doing things, you know, their own way doesn't quite make sense.

JOHN MERROW: Do you anticipate using some of this stimulus money, this incentive money to help these national standards emerge?

ARNE DUNCAN: Absolutely.

JOHN MERROW: So states will get money if they do this thing that Duncan wants?

ARNE DUNCAN: If you play by these rules, absolutely right.

JOHN MERROW: You're OK with having a secretary of education say, "You can get some money, Stu, if you do what I want"?

STU SILBERMAN: You know what? I think that it's a whole lot better than not getting any money.

CHRISTOPHER CROSS: Let's face it: He who has the gold rules. You may have all the consultation in the world, but, at the end, as Harry Truman would say, "The buck

stops here."

Obama 'committed' to education

JOHN MERROW: It's not just money and power that explained Duncan's optimism. There is one other factor.

ARNE DUNCAN: We also have an extraordinary opportunity with what I call the Obama effect, that you have two people who are absolutely committed to education, who get this, who have lived this.

JOHN MERROW: And they will continue to meet on the court in pickup games.

When you're on the court, are you going to talk education?

ARNE DUNCAN: I think we'll be talking pick-and-rolls and jump shots. That's probably what we talk about on the basketball court.

JOHN MERROW: States and school districts have to apply for a share of the \$5 billion of discretionary money. It will take months for Duncan and his staff to decide who gets what.