

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

State's top teachers offer incoming Education Secretary Duncan advice for improving the U.S. educational experience

CHICAGO (January 28, 2009) – Last week President Obama challenged members of his administration to tap into the experience and knowledge of ordinary Americans to help “solve the problems of our time,” and Golden Apple has heeded the call to help Education Secretary-Designate Duncan solve the very real problems facing the American education system.

A panel of master teachers, including Chicago-area recipients of the Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching and educators whose preparation was provided by the Golden Apple Scholars of Illinois program, are calling for innovative measures to help improve the educational experiences of children including:

- Improved continuity of content from primary grades through college
- Greater attention paid to the impact of students’ emotional needs on their ability to learn
- Re-thinking of the No Child Left Behind Act
- Expanding the small-schools movement to help close the achievement gap
- Shifting the focus away from testing-based teaching to problem-solving based teaching

The 12-member panel met January 21 in Chicago to offer their expertise to Arne Duncan, the former CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, who is also a member of the board of directors of the Golden Apple Foundation, which presents the awards and administers the Scholars program.

High school teacher Katie Hogan called for greater access to federal funds to permit students to go to college. She would like to see more partnerships between high schools and universities such as the one between her school and Roosevelt University. In that partnership Roosevelt provides four-year scholarships to top high-school seniors, and also sends its education majors into the high school to provide the seniors with tutoring and mentoring.

“So not only are we improving teacher preparation by giving them real-life experiences working with urban youth, ” Hogan said, “but we’re also creating that culture of college that students are missing (and saying) if you put the effort in, you will be rewarded by our society.”

High school principal Elizabeth Kirby said Duncan should see to it that there is strong, coordinated instruction from early childhood through college. The absence of continuity leads to “lack of engagement in school... a dropout crisis... (and) teachers feeling burned out and overwhelmed,” she said.

School counselor Lynda Parker cautioned that “the emotional piece has to be factored in” because many children come to school “who are dying on the inside.” “They go from (being) adults at home to being children at school then being adults at the end of the day when they have to pick up their brothers and sisters, and we’re asking them to step between these two worlds fluidly and not saying to them, ‘I understand what’s going on.’”

“A lot of our children are raising themselves,” said Principal Michele Washington. “Forget ‘latchkey kids’ – they are parents.”

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is “punitive, it’s rigid, it doesn’t make sense,” said Professor Mark Larson of National-Louis University. “Look at what made sense about it (in the first place) and then start to rebuild,” he advised. “Its implementation is where it went wrong.”

“There needs to be a timeline that’s realistic to prepare students (for the test),” said Michele Washington. “And why not test them in their native language if they’re in a transitional program... and do modified testing” for children from the gifted to the learning-disabled spectrums?

The higher standards that No Child Left Behind “proposed for education are wonderful,” said Ziomara Perez, “However it is “unfair to compare a school that has a small class size... to another school that is dealing with 35-plus children (where) the teacher is unable to differentiate any instruction and they lack materials.... It’s very unfair... and needs to be looked into.”

According to the panel, another downside of the culture of testing-based teaching is that it doesn’t necessarily prepare students for life outside of the classroom.

“Learning is making connections, and teaching is not (about) making connections for a student, but facilitating the work of students and their making of connections themselves,” explained high school physics teacher Sam Dyson.

“I think what Secretary Duncan has the opportunity to do is to address these problems... in the interconnected way that we’re talking by connecting what happens in the colleges with what happens in early childhood, or connecting what happens in physics with what happens in math or in other subjects as well, in order not only to solve problems more effectively, but also to create a model for what is at the root, at the heart of the work we’re trying to do. Creating connections and creating a context for students to create their own.”

Moderator Dominic Belmonte, Golden Apple president and CEO, asked the panelists for their advice to the Obama administration on how best to close the achievement gap.

In reply, Katie Hogan said she is “thinking about the call our principal makes to us at the beginning of the school year, which is today.... We are all going to go out and walk and visit the homes of each and every one of our students. The only way we get to do that is because I work in a small school. So one of the things I would recommend to close

the achievement gap is to very strongly consider the small-schools movement becoming... more nationwide, because it has proven so effective in making instruction culturally relevant, allowing investment from parents, and allowing teachers to feel like they have a say.... And although the small schools cost a little bit more, that cost pays off in such higher graduation rates and higher teacher retention rates that it's the most cost-effective thing I've ever seen in education."

A DVD and transcript of the 90-minute panel discussion is being sent to Secretary Duncan. The material may be requested by emailing calies@theharbingergroup.com.

About Golden Apple

Golden Apple began in 1985 with founders Mike and Pat Koldyke and a shared inspiration — to offer outstanding school teachers the level of recognition enjoyed by actors at the Academy Awards. Golden Apple's successful track record now spans more than 20 years. Integrated, innovative Golden Apple programs and resources enhance the quality, resiliency, and creativity of classroom teachers and improve teaching and learning throughout Illinois. Qualified, passionate educators — including Golden Apple Award-winners and finalists — lead a small staff of dedicated employees with functional and program expertise. A connected and committed board of directors oversees Golden Apple's strategic direction. Together with a larger community of expert educators, the not-for-profit organization works to ensure that all Illinois children have the excellent teachers they deserve.

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