

Council for American Private Education

CAPE outlook

Voice of America's private schools

Students Surprised by Obama's Thanksgiving Visit

Students at St. Columbanus Catholic School on Chicago's South Side were honored by a startlingly unexpected visit the day before Thanksgiving—a visit they will likely never forget. President-elect Barack Obama and his family stopped by the school after handing out food to needy families in an adjacent church parking lot.

According to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Mr. Obama was distributing Thanksgiving meals and noticed children waving from the windows. He said to his wife, Michelle, "We've got to go in there and say 'hi' to those kids." School officials quickly gathered the enthusiastic students into the auditorium for what turned out to be a five-minute visit replete with handshakes, hugs, and sage advice.

When the president-elect and his family entered the room, students burst spontaneously into exuberant cheers and applause. Obama wished everyone a happy Thanksgiving and proceeded to poll the admiring assembly on what foods would be included in their next day's meal.

Sweet-potato pie seemed to get the most vociferous votes.

Offering what sounded more like paternal than presidential advice, Obama urged



President-elect Barack Obama greets students at St. Columbanus School in Chicago November 26. (AP Images / Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

the pre-kindergarten to eighth-grade students to read, do their math, listen to their teachers, be good to their parents, and treat each other with respect. "There is nothing you can't do," he told them. "You guys might even end up being president

someday."

Obama seemed to relish the unscheduled and unscripted event as much as the children. Fully at ease and enjoying the exchange, he entertained some questions. One sixth-grader asked what it's like to be president. "I'm not president yet. I've only been elected president. I'm gonna be sworn in as president on January 20th," said Obama, as the children let out an ear-shattering yell.

Another student asked what it is like to be followed around by so many people. Although Obama expressed appreciation for the Secret Service and the press corps that form his constant entourage, he said he doesn't get as much alone time as he used to. "I gotta admit that sometimes it's kinda strange where you kinda just want to go to Walgreens and pick something up or you just want to go take a walk or go out and ride your bike or something, and you always have somebody with you," Obama said. "So you don't have a lot of privacy, and that's one

continued on page 2

New Education Secretary's Vision Shaped by Private School

Arne Duncan, President-elect Barack Obama's choice for secretary of education, has a perspective on quality education and school reform firmly rooted in his private school experience. A 1982 graduate of the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, Duncan wrote in the *Chicago Sun-Times* earlier this year, "Going to Lab was an absolutely formative experience for me. My vision of what it takes to give students a great education started there. I was so lucky to go there."

Duncan was on the basketball team at Lab and continued to play for his college team at Harvard before going on to play professionally in Australia. His wife, Kar-

en, started working as a physical education teacher at Lab in 1992 and was appointed athletic director in 1997. (She left in 2001 to become a full-time mother. The Duncans have two children, Claire and Ryan.)

In the *Sun-Times* piece, published in February 2008, Duncan wrote: "So much of the Lab Schools' culture helped shape my philosophy. It really had a small-school feel. You knew the teachers, and you knew the students. Academic achievement and intellectual curiosity were really fostered. I had some great teachers who challenged me and taught me to write and think critically. The diversity and commitment to helping others are so important.

That is why you see so many alums go into public service. We were given a gift, and it's our responsibility to give that gift to others."

In 2007, Duncan received Lab's Distinguished Alumni Award, the highest honor for an alum, which is given "in recognition of a graduate's outstanding contributions to society through his/her professional or personal life." A profile on Lab's Web site quotes Duncan as saying, "Lab is what great education looks like." The profile goes on to state that Duncan's experience at Lab "has heavily shaped his vision of what all children deserve educationally."

continued on page 3



CAPE member organizations:

- Agudath Israel of America
- American Montessori Society
- Association Montessori International—USA
- Association of Christian Schools International
- Association of Christian Teachers and Schools
- Association of Waldorf Schools of N.A.
- Christian Schools International
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Friends Council on Education
- Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
- National Association of Episcopal Schools
- National Association of Independent Schools
- National Catholic Educational Association
- National Christian School Association
- Oral Roberts University Educational Fellowship
- Seventh-day Adventist Board of Education
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
- Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Schools
- 31 Affiliated State Organizations

a coalition of national associations serving private schools K-12
 Executive Director: Joe McTighe

Outlook is published monthly (September to June) by CAPE. An annual subscription is \$25. ISSN 0271-1451

13017 Wisteria Drive #457
 Germantown, MD 20874
 (tel) 301-916-8460
 (fax) 301-916-8485
 (email) cape@capenet.org

www.capenet.org



Why the Obamas Chose Sidwell

Irene McHenry, vice president of CAPE and executive director of the Friends Council on Education, wrote the following opinion piece.

Why did the Obamas select Sidwell Friends School for their children? The media’s answer has emphasized that Sidwell is private, expensive and, most of all, elite. Ironically, the choice of a Quaker school means just the opposite. In spite of Sidwell’s reputation as “the Harvard of Washington, DC, prep schools,” the fact is that Friends schools are diverse, open, and teach equality and community service. The Obamas know that, and it probably had something to do with their choice.

A few facts to counter the elitist myth about Friends schools: There are currently 86 Friends schools across the United States, all of which provide a values-centered education, with a curricular emphasis on respect for diversity, active participation in democracy, collaboration, and peace.

Sidwell Friends is no different from the other 44 urban Friends schools in the United States. Throughout their history these leading-edge schools have achieved authentic economic, religious and racial diversity. Of students in urban Friends schools, 56% come from families with annual incomes under \$35,000. Many students receiving financial aid also receive free lunch and have access to the cafeteria in the beginning and end of the school day. In urban Friends schools, 11% to 40% of the students receive financial aid. Sidwell, the largest urban Friends school (1100 students), provides financial aid totaling more than \$5 million annually to ensure socio-economic diversity. As for religious diversity, the

student body draws from nearly every religious tradition on earth. Most Friends schools average only 6% Quaker students.

The Obamas also know that Friends schools promote a vision for democracy. Quakers believe that each person has the capacity for goodness and a responsibility to attain that goodness. Students learn that all of life is sacred, learn to resolve conflicts non-violently through thoughtful listening and active engagement with different perspectives, learn to embrace the diversity of cultures and religions represented in their schools. Students learn to take action in alignment with their core moral beliefs and to work for the good of society through energetic service to their communities and the world.

Quaker values are not unique; these values can be found in most religious traditions. What makes a Friends school environment special is that these values are woven into daily life, both in and out of the classroom. Friends education provides a constructivist approach, an inquiry-based pedagogy valuing multiple perspectives, and a continual search for academic excellence within a values-centered environment.

Sidwell Friends School exemplifies the special DNA of Quaker schools, just right for the families that choose them. The DNA combines academic vigor, the quest for excellence in the educational program, and a community sustained by an inward, spiritual experience expressed in the living values of the school.

The Obamas recognized this and, as Mrs. Obama’s spokeswoman said, “In the end, the Obamas selected the school that was the best fit for what their daughters need right now.”

continued from page 1

of the things you have to sacrifice.”

Before leaving, Obama again wished everyone a great Thanksgiving and told the children to extend his wish to their moms, dads, and families. “I just want you to know that what I’m thankful for is my family and my friends and my community,” he said. “That’s the most important thing, so I hope you guys are thankful for that, too.”

After some final handshakes and prying free from a semicircle of children clinging to his coat, Obama left to a chorus of chants: “O-ba-ma... O-ba-ma...O-ba-ma.”

St. Columbanus School’s mission is to “teach, guide, and direct students in Christian values and to prepare them to become productive members of society.” The school, which enrolls approximately 300 students, seeks to form persons who are “morally strong” and “deeply committed to the community, their country, and the world.” Most students are African American; over 60

percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, and about 70 percent come from single-parent families.

Mrs. Sandra E. Wilson, the school’s principal, told CAPE her students were “surprised and thrilled” by Obama’s visit. She shared an especially touching thank-you note that Kristian Walker, a second grader, had written to the president-elect: “I would like to thank you for taking the time out of your busy day to visit us at our school. Just three days before I met you, I had asked my mom if she thought that I would get a chance to meet you, now that you are president-elect, and she said that it was possible. I am very grateful for the opportunity to have met you and to be a part of history. Remember me, because I plan to make history too.” Wilson said Kristian’s note reflects how much the visit inspired all the school’s students.

A video of the Obama visit is available on CAPE’s Web site at <capenet.org/new.html>.

continued from page 1

At the time of the award, David W. McGill, director of the Lab Schools, said: “Those from Lab who know Arne are very proud of his work with the Chicago public schools and believe that an important part of his leadership capacity was cultivated during his student years with us. He has the right temperament, skills, and instincts to lead a very complex organization. More importantly, he has a big heart for the young people of Chicago. They are most fortunate to have him in their corner.”

After Duncan was named secretary-designate, McGill told CAPE that he regarded him as “the best choice for our country right now.” He described the next secretary as very smart, very capable, and experienced in the everyday workings of education. He’s a “true practitioner,” said McGill, who has worked in the trenches “improving education from the ground up.”

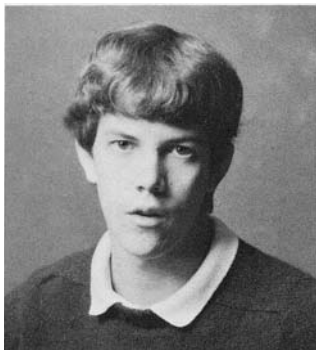
Officials from various organizations serving private schools in Illinois also have a favorable take on Duncan, describing him in positive and promising terms: focused, genuine, easy to work with, honest, thoughtful, and straightforward. He is also regarded as someone who understands the value and contributions of religious and independent schools. Dr. John Cooper, headmaster at Elgin Academy in Elgin, IL, and chairman of the Illinois State CAPE, called Duncan “an outstanding choice” for secretary of education. “He’s bright, he’s innovative, and he listens to all sides of an argument.”

Practical Experience

Before he became chief executive of Chicago’s public schools, Duncan served as chief of staff under Paul Vallas, the previous CEO. Before that, he directed what is now the Ariel Education Initiative, a not-for-profit organization committed to “advancing educational opportunities in economically disadvantaged areas.”

As a child, Duncan spent a significant amount of time at his mother’s after-school tutoring program, the Sue Duncan Children’s Center. Founded in 1960, the program, which serves disadvantaged children from Chicago’s South Side, continues to operate to this day. In a 2007 interview with *Edutopia*, Duncan said his mother originally wanted to set up the program at a local public school, but because she wasn’t allowed to, she established it instead in a church basement across the street. Thirty years later, he and his sister also tried to start an after-school program at a public school site,

was turned down, and wound up doing so in the same church basement. So when he took the helm of the Chicago public school system, one of Duncan’s priorities was to open up the schools so nonprofit organizations and social service



Arne Duncan’s yearbook photo, courtesy of University of Chicago Laboratory Schools

agencies could offer onsite services and programs. “We have some extraordinary kids who beat the odds every single day after coming from some very tough situations,” he told *Edutopia*. “And we owe it to them to do our best in creating the best opportunities possible for them.” In the same interview, Duncan described how at his mother’s after-school program he saw firsthand how poor and disadvantaged students could succeed academically when given the right support.

New Vision for Education

In announcing Duncan as his secretary-designate December 16, President-elect Obama said that when it comes to education reform, Washington is “stuck in the same tired debates that have stymied our progress and left schools and parents to fend for themselves—Democrat versus Republican, vouchers versus the status quo, more money versus more reform—all along failing to acknowledge that both sides have good ideas and good intentions.” Describing the educational status quo as “morally unacceptable for our children and economically untenable for America,” Obama called for a “new vision for the 21st century education system: one where we aren’t just supporting existing schools but spurring innovation; where we’re not just investing more money but demanding more reform.”

Obama said Duncan has devoted his life’s work to educational improvement. “When it comes to school reform, Arne is the most hands-on of hands-on practitioners. For Arne, school reform isn’t just a theory in a book, it’s the cause of his life.” He described Duncan as one who transcends ideology. “When faced with tough decisions, Arne doesn’t blink. He’s not beholden to any one ideology, and he doesn’t hesitate for one minute to do what needs to be done.”

At the same news conference, Mr. Duncan said, “No issue is more pressing than education.... It is the civil rights issue of our generation, and it is the one sure path to a more equal, fair and just society.” He went on to say that “children have just one chance to get a quality education, and they need and deserve the absolute best.” Noting the importance of teamwork in attaining education success, Duncan said, “Together, we have a chance to do something extraordinary for our nation’s children.”

Punahou Has Busy December

Despite the holiday break, December was a busy month at the Punahou School in Honolulu.

For starters, President-elect Barack Obama, the school’s most famous graduate, returned to his alma mater to play some basketball with friends. According to Hawaii’s KITV, Obama played hoops for about two hours December 30, and then spent about 10 minutes greeting 200 or so students, parents, and teachers outside the gym. “He came and saw all of us, took his time as he came down through and said hi to all of us. It was really nice,” said Punahou teacher and alumna Malia Chong.

Mark A. Kam, president of the Punahou Alumni Association, told the Associated Press that Obama’s return to Hawaii demonstrates he has not forgotten his roots. Referring to Obama’s footwear, Kam said, “When I saw him walking around town in rubber slippers, I said, OK, that’s who he is. That’s the local boy that grew up here. How many other people go away, come back, and slip right back into rubber slippers?”

Meanwhile, in other parts of the campus, the Punahou School Marching Band and JROTC Marching Unit spent considerable time in December practicing for their participation in the 56th Inaugural Parade in Washington, DC, January 20. They received word December 5 from the Presidential Inaugural Committee that they were one of the groups selected from nearly 1,400 organizations that had applied to participate.

“For the band and cadets, it’s an honor to represent Hawaii and Punahou School in this parade—allowing us to be part of history,” said Darin Au, head of the upper school music department. “Our participation is also meaningful because President-elect Obama is such an inspiration for our students. He’s a powerful reminder that they can achieve whatever they dream.”

Return service requested

CAPE notes

★ Fast Facts: “An estimated 1.5 million students (1,508,000) were home-schooled in the United States in the spring of 2007,” according to an issue brief released in December by the National Center for Education Statistics. The number is up from 1.1 million homeschooled students in 2003 and 850,000 in 1999. The 2007 figure represents about 2.9 percent of the school-age population, compared to 2.2 percent in 2003 and 1.7 percent in 1999.

Data were collected through the National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES) for students ages 5 through 17. Students are considered homeschooled if they are taught at home exclusively (which is true for 84 percent of homeschooled students) or if they are taught at home part-time and enrolled in public or private schools for 25 hours or less per week (which applies to 16 percent of homeschooled students).

Why do parents choose to teach at home? In the 2007 survey, the parents of 88 percent of homeschooled students said concern about the regular school environment was one of their reasons (they could choose more than one); parents of 83 percent of students said a desire to provide religious or moral instruction was a reason, and parents of 73 percent expressed dissatisfaction with the academic instruction at other schools.

When asked to identify their most important reason for homeschooling, parents of 36 percent of students said it was to

provide religious or moral instruction (the most popular “most important” reason). For parents of 21 percent of students it was concern about the school environment, and for parents of 17 percent it was dissatisfaction with the academic instruction available at other schools.

The issue brief is available on the NCES Web site at <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009030.pdf>>.

★ On the way from his hotel to a meeting with the National Governors Association (NGA) in Philadelphia December 2, President-elect Barack Obama found time to say hello and shake hands with students from the city’s Friends Select School. According to the school’s Web site, “This is the third time members of the lower school have had a chance to meet Obama.” Twice last spring, lower school students met Obama when he was campaigning in the highly contested Pennsylvania Democratic primary. Photos of the visits are available on the school’s Web site at <http://www.friends-select.org/RelId/610999/ISvars/default/Surprise_visit_from_.htm>.

★ President Bush awarded the Presidential Citizens Medal to Father John P. Foley, S.J., founder of the Cristo Rey Network, a system of 22 Catholic high schools serving low-income students. A unique feature of the Cristo Rey program is that students spend part of their week working at local businesses to gain practical job ex-

perience and to help cover the cost of their education.

Foley was one of 23 individuals awarded the medal at a ceremony in the Oval Office December 10. According to the White House Web site, the medal “was established in November 13, 1969, to recognize U.S. citizens who have performed exemplary deeds of service for the nation. It is one of the highest honors the president can confer upon a civilian.”

The award citation reads: “Father John Foley has successfully reached some of our nation’s most vulnerable youth and instilled in them a love of learning. Through his spiritual leadership of a faith-based education system that partners with the community, he has provided opportunities for young people to achieve their dreams. The United States honors Father John Foley for his commitment to helping his fellow citizens lead lives of integrity and achievement.”

★ Qualifying high school mock-trial teams are invited to compete in the fourth American Mock Trial Invitational (AMTI) May 17-19, 2009, at the Middlesex County Courthouse in New Brunswick, NJ. AMTI was established by the New Jersey State Bar Foundation and the North Carolina Advocates for Justice in order to permit high school mock trial state champions with weekend religious obligations to compete in a national forum on weekdays. For more information, contact Sheila Boro at 732-937-7519 or sboro@njsbf.org.