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ED Secretary Arne Duncan announces 'Investing in Innovation Fund,' which aims to encourage successful, sustainable school reforms

By Laura Devaney, Senior Editor

Primary Topic Channel: [Funding](#)

U.S. schools will have a chance this fall to compete for part of \$650 million in new "innovation" funds that are intended to reward districts that have designed and tested effective, scalable systems for boosting student achievement, improving failing schools, retaining top-notch teachers, and increasing graduation rates.

The Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) is intended to expand programs that advance the goals of the U.S. Department of Education (ED), while at the same time investing in programs that show promise.

ED's programs to promote innovation have been "modest at best," said U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan at an Aug. 20 press conference to discuss the i3 program.

Duncan said he wants ED to become "an engine of motivation, not a compliance machine."

This fall, the public will be invited to comment on the i3 program. Applications will be available following the comment period, and awards will be made in early 2010.

Although not all program details are available yet, Duncan did disclose some of the main requirements:

- Boost student achievement, increase graduation rates, and retain teachers;
- Be scalable;
- Offer sustainable innovation, not flash-in-the-pan ideas that will burn out; and
- Attract some matching funds along with ED's grant dollars.

Grants will be awarded to school districts, nonprofits that work with educators, colleges and universities, charter schools, and school turnaround specialists.

Grants for proven programs most likely will be more substantial than grants for untested programs, Duncan added. Currently, ED estimates that funding amounts will include up to \$5 million per award for Pure Innovation grants to explore interesting ideas; up to \$30 million per award for Strategic Investment grants for programs that need additional research in order to succeed on a larger scale; and up to \$50 million per award for Grow What Works grants, for proven programs that are ready to expand.

President Obama has called for the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world--an ambitious but attainable goal, Duncan said.

"To reach that finish line, we need transformational change--the islands of excellence that exist in school districts have to become the norm," he said.

Many curricular reforms over the years have had little impact and little staying power. Some, such as Advanced Placement programs, caught on and have had a positive impact on education.

"But school reform failed to rigorously assess what worked, and what didn't, and it followed fads instead," Duncan said. He added: "Gaps in knowledge of effective practices hamper the education system."

Duncan pointed to virtual schools as one tool that can help students succeed where they otherwise might have fallen behind.

"Online courses and supplementation are catching on fast, but we've made only limited investments in understanding online instruction," he said.

Online courses can expand access to high-level courses, especially in rural areas where 21st-century learning opportunities might be limited owing to distance, lack of funds, or lack of qualified instructors to teach specialized subjects.

"An effective teacher is the single biggest factor in determining student progress," Duncan said. Tools are available today that weren't available just a decade ago, he added--including formative assessment and real-time data to inform instruction.

"We want to provide powerful incentives to districts and nonprofits to build the next generation of education reform," Duncan said. "Successful innovations, we know, are disruptive--we not only understand that, we welcome it."

And ED will be looking--though not exclusively, Duncan noted--for proposals that advance its own four key reforms: college-and career-ready standards, data systems, teacher and principal quality, and turning around underperforming schools. (See "[Duncan outlines school reform agenda.](#)")

"We hope to do this in a way that not only produces innovative solutions, but changes the way we think about the process," said Jim Shelton, ED's assistant deputy secretary for innovation and improvement.

Shelton said the department is expecting thousands of applications once i3 program details are released.

Link:

[FD's i3 fact sheet](#)

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