

The Race

*January 29, 2009, 1:15 p.m.,
Oval Office, the White House*

As he filed into the Oval Office behind the power players who were already household names in Washington—top presidential adviser David Axelrod, chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan—Jon Schnur thought that he had spent years waiting to have this meeting.* Until now he had been jilted. The Democrats he had worked for had always backed away from the education reforms he championed. And they hadn't been elected.

Schnur, then forty-three, got interested in education when, as an editor of his high school newspaper, he read a draft of an article by a student who had transferred from a Milwaukee public school to his school in the city's suburbs. "She was savvier than any of us on the editorial board, but the draft was just so terribly written," he says. "The more I got to know her, the more I became obsessed with why public education hadn't reached people like her."

After he graduated from Princeton, where he had volunteered as a tutor in a nearby high school, Schnur worked in Bill Clinton's presidential campaign, then landed an education policy job in his administration.

That was when Schnur started to distrust his assumptions about why American public education had collapsed to a point where it was an obstacle to the American dream rather than the enabler. As he studied research trickling in by the late 1990s, he began to believe that failure or success in America's schoolrooms, especially in its poorest communities, didn't depend mostly on what kind

* Unless otherwise noted, thoughts attributed to anyone in this narrative are based on the author's having talked to that person. A full explanation of sources can be found in the Notes section at the back of this book.

of home a child came from or whether the school had enough resources, which is what most liberals like Schnur had always assumed. Instead, he concluded, it had to do more with the teacher in front of the class. Truly effective teaching, he came to believe, could overcome student indifference, parental disengagement, and poverty—and, in fact, was the key to enabling children to rise above those circumstances.

However, as the studies and the reports from a new kind of public school called “charter schools” were finding, successful teaching was grueling work. It required more talent, more preparation, more daily reevaluation and retooling, more hours in the class day, and just plain more perseverance than many teachers, and most teachers’ union contracts, were willing or able to provide. In Schnur’s view, the unions and those who ran the nation’s increasingly bureaucratic school systems had settled on low expectations for children, which allowed them not to be held accountable when the children continued to fail. Change those expectations; put good, determined teachers and principals in there; retrain or, if necessary, remove those who were not effective; and “demography will no longer be destiny,” Schnur and his fellow reformers believed. That presented a dilemma if you were a Democrat, because the Democratic Party had come to rely on teachers’ unions as its strongest base of support.

By 1998, Schnur was Vice President Al Gore’s education policy aide. During his boss’s 2000 presidential campaign, he persuaded Gore to give a speech to the Michigan teachers’ union about the need to pay teachers based on how effective they were in boosting their students’ performance, an idea that struck at the core of union contracts that mandated lockstep compensation based only on how many years a teacher had been teaching, or what graduate degrees the teacher held.

Gore hadn’t flinched. He hadn’t even tinkered with some of the language that Schnur had made tougher in anticipation that the vice president or someone else would water it down.

Right after the speech, the air came out of Schnur’s balloon. Within days, the two national teachers’ unions—which donate three times more money to Democrats than any other union or industry group and whose members account for more than 25 percent of all union members in the country and 10–15 percent of

the delegates to the Democratic Party convention that chooses the presidential nominee—had complained to higher-ups in the Gore campaign. Without anyone’s informing Schnur, Gore’s education reform positions disappeared from the campaign issues material. Gore never again mentioned teacher quality in his campaign, or any of the other education reforms that Schnur proposed. In the presidential debates between Gore and George W. Bush, the Texas governor talked about how he had pushed to make his state’s schools and their teachers accountable for performance by requiring all students to be tested so their progress could be measured. Gore said testing by school systems should be voluntary and called for more federal aid to hire more teachers and pay them all more.

Four years later, Schnur signed on to help John Kerry, who as a senator had taken an interest in education reform. He drafted policy papers and a speech or two. The Kerry 2004 presidential campaign used none of them.

Now, as he took his seat on a sofa near the fireplace in the Oval Office, Schnur recalled how Obama ’08 had been completely different. Since coming to the Senate in 2005, Barack Obama had been talking about education in ways that would have alarmed the teachers’ unions, if they had cared enough to notice what a junior senator was saying. In 2006, he introduced legislation to provide federal aid to school districts that initiated reforms, such as linking teachers’ pay and promotions to how well their students advanced on tests during the school year. The legislation went nowhere. And just two days after he announced his presidential candidacy, on a swing through Iowa to compete in the state’s bellwether caucuses, he had answered a question about increasing teachers’ salaries by saying that, yes, teachers should be paid more but that “there’s also going to have to be accountability,” and that students’ performance on standardized tests “has to be part of the mix.”

“Such candor is refreshing,” David Yepsen, the influential political columnist for the *Des Moines Register*, wrote the next day, adding that he had asked Obama after his talk if a “candidate can win if he tells Democratic constituency groups things they don’t want to hear.”

“We’ll see,” Obama responded.

Obama’s main opponent, Hillary Clinton, enjoyed the longtime

support and friendship of American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten. She had been a co-chair of Clinton's first New York senate campaign. Clinton responded to Obama's stance by calling merit pay divisive and insulting to teachers.

A few weeks after Obama's comment in Iowa, Schnur and campaign issues director Heather Higginbottom had presented him with an eight-point education reform platform. Higginbottom, then thirty-eight, had been Senator John Kerry's legislative director and then his issues director in his 2004 presidential run. So she and Schnur were longtime collaborators, and education reform was her favorite issue, too. Perhaps because of the disappointing experience in the Kerry campaign, when education reform had been trumped by the political team's fear of the teachers' unions, they were apprehensive that Obama might cut out or water down one or two of their most union-offending ideas.

Obama signed off on all eight points with little discussion, other than to tell them, "This is what I've been saying for a long time. . . . Just don't poke the unions in the eye with this. No anti-union rhetoric, and keep channels of communication open with them."*

So nothing about this Oval Office session with the new president should have made Schnur nervous. In fact, he was thrilled that eight days into Obama's presidency, amid the fierce economic crisis and other issues that commanded his attention, Obama had reserved a half hour to deal with education. Yet Schnur was nervous anyway, not only because those other Democrats had failed him before, but also because, in terms of its prescriptions for changing K-12 education across the country and how much money it proposed to make that happen, the plan that he, Higginbottom, and Duncan had cooked up was far beyond what any president had ever dared. In a December transition meeting, Obama had signed off more generally on the direction he would follow in education reform. Now it was time for specifics, and the specifics were not conventional.

Schnur had written a three-page memo summarizing how the Obama administration would take the \$800 billion economic stim-

* Quotations of conversations are based on the recollections of those who were present. In situations where the recollections are not explicit, quotation marks are not used, and the conversations are paraphrased.

ulus package the president was about to propose and carve out \$15 billion as a jackpot to be divided among ten to fifteen states that won a contest related to education reform. It would be a real contest, with no state able to prevail because of size or political influence. The winners would be states that submitted the best, most credible *specific* plans for using data and student-testing systems to evaluate teachers based on student improvement; for creating compensation and tenure systems for principals and teachers that would be based on their effectiveness in boosting their students' proficiency; for taking over and turning around consistently failing schools; and for encouraging alternatives to traditional public schools—such as charter schools.

The proposed contest had a catchy name: Race to the Top.

Schnur had brought thirty pages of backup material that had been attached to the three-pager when it was sent to the president. But Obama, sitting in a chair opposite his desk to the right of Schnur's sofa, said he had read it and didn't need to go over it again. In fact, Schnur and Higginbottom, who was also at this Oval Office meeting, were delighted to see that the president had underlined the part of the memo—and put a big check mark in the margin next to it—that said that not all states would get the money, just those that deserved it on the merits of their reform plans.

The new president asked the others what they thought. Axelrod, sitting on the couch across from Schnur and Duncan, jumped in and said that the unions would erupt in opposition, which could endanger support for the overall stimulus package among the Democrats whom Obama would need to get it through. This was not the way aid bills were done, Axelrod added, a point that was seconded by Obama's just-appointed congressional liaison. It was a direct assault on congressional prerogatives. The members of Congress would insist that, as with most aid programs and certainly ones involving billions of dollars, every state and congressional district should get the money proportionately, rather than have it parceled out to a chosen few by the White House or the education secretary. The unions would fan the flames on that, he added, reminding powerful senators and representatives, who chaired the relevant committees and were the unions' traditional allies and recipients of campaign support, that their states or districts might get nothing.

Schnur and Duncan knew that many of the states that were home to influential Democrats on Capitol Hill, particularly California but also Wisconsin and New York, were unlikely to win any contests related to education reform unless a booby prize was awarded. Duncan, an education reformer who had gotten to know Obama because he had been running Chicago's school system until his appointment to the cabinet, kept that thought to himself. This was a singular opportunity for the president to act on something he cared a lot about, he told Obama.

Schnur—who is deferential and soft-spoken, even when he is the person in the room who knows the most, as he often is—spoke haltingly to the new president. He said he thought they could overcome any opposition on the Hill because this was only \$15 billion in an \$800 billion package and because there was such goodwill, on the Democratic side, at least, toward the new president.

Although he did not volunteer it, Schnur knew that George Miller, the senior Democrat in the House on education issues, would support the contest. Schnur had already checked with him.

Miller had long been out of sync with the teachers' unions and more traditional Democrats on education reform, in part because of his experience as a volunteer at a hard-pressed school in his California district. "We shouldn't just write checks," Miller had told Schnur. "We should make them do something for it."

As a congressman, Emanuel had co-authored a book the year before on domestic policy, in which he touted education reform of the kind Schnur was now pushing. And as the incoming chief of staff he had on more than one occasion good-naturedly egged on domestic policy aide Higginbottom with whispers of "education reform, education reform" when they passed in the halls at the Chicago transition office. "You don't get any do-overs in education; you get one shot to succeed or fail with a kid, and our schools were mostly failing," Emanuel says, explaining his passion for the issue.

Now Emanuel butted in, saying, "We've got to do this. It's a great plan. . . . This is our great opportunity. And I know we can get a lot of Democrats to support it."

The boss seemed to have made up his mind. "Yes, let's do it," Obama said. "I always say this is supposed to be about the kids, not the adults."

"Just make sure," the president added, repeating what he'd told Schnur and the others in Iowa, "that we don't poke the unions in the eye with this. Just do what we have to do."

With that decision, Obama unleashed a swirl of forces whose ferocity would exceed anything even Schnur expected. Parents would march in Los Angeles and Tallahassee demanding the reforms the contest prescribed. The "Race" and education reform would become defining issues in elections from Florida to Colorado to the District of Columbia. Key laws and regulations would be changed in Michigan, Louisiana, Nevada, Tennessee, and thirty other states.

Indeed, something unusual broke out across America: a substantive policy debate that engaged a broad swath of the citizenry and their elected officials in villages, cities, state capitals, and in Washington—and that actually produced results.

All of that happened because the contest for the stimulus money became a call to arms for a snowballing network of education reformers across the country—an unlikely army of non-traditional urban school chiefs, charter school leaders, researchers at think tanks who were producing data about how teaching counted more than anything else, philanthropists and hedge-fund billionaires who ate up the data, fed-up parents, and a growing corps of unconventional Democratic politicians. Having worked for years in cities and towns across the country, almost unnoticed except among education bureaucrats, they now sprang up and took center stage. Schnur, a behind-the-scenes player, seemed to be at the center of the network. Everyone seemed to know him, even people who didn't know each other.

At the same time, the Race to the Top became a call to the barricades for those who had held back the reformers for years with arguments that their theories were simplistic and untested, and that they glossed over the real obstacles of poverty and racism while scapegoating the one group—educators—who really understood the issues and who really cared.

The leader in making that argument would be Randi Weingarten, who was fifty-one when the Race was launched and who would assume an increasingly high national profile in the two years that followed.

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A savvy New Yorker whose mother had been an elementary school teacher for twenty-nine years, Weingarten is a talented leader, able and relentlessly eager to make the case that teachers and her American Federation of Teachers are dedicated enablers of children's success, not self-interested impediments. For years she had teased her mother that she had become a lawyer and her sister an emergency room doctor because neither wanted to work as hard as she had seen her mother work.

Schnur's Race to the Top—because it called for a sweeping overhaul of a system where no one had been held accountable, and because it enlisted the nation's school chiefs, mayors, and governors in a "contest" that caught on in the media—would force Weingarten's side to play defense in political arenas that this side had traditionally dominated. The onslaught would become so heavy in so many places that Weingarten would start confiding to friends that she feared her union was destined to meet the fate of the United Auto Workers, which had been crippled when competing, nonunion car-makers almost put Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler out of business by producing better, cheaper cars.

In Weingarten's world, charter schools were to teachers' unions and conventional public schools what Toyota or Honda had been to the autoworkers' union and the big three Detroit automakers. So it especially alarmed her that encouraging the growth of charter schools would be one of the ways a state could score points in the Race to the Top.

First promoted by the Clinton administration in the 1990s, charter schools are publicly financed and open to any child, but they are run by entities other than the conventional local school district. Typically, they are operated by nonprofit organizations that rely on donations to provide seed money to launch the school but then use the same amount, or less taxpayer money per pupil, as is doled out to the public schools for ongoing operations. Those who run charters are accountable for the school's performance. However, they are free to manage as they wish, which includes the freedom to hire teachers who are not union members. Students are admitted based on a lottery; these are public schools with no admissions requirements or any other filters (other than the lottery when applications outnumber seats).

Charters were a relatively minor factor in the plans the states had to present to win the Race to the Top. However, because Weingarten and her side directed so much vitriol at charters, the role of charter schools in the Race to the Top would get more attention than it deserved. The Obama plan was not about charter schools. Nor is this book about charter schools, except insofar as charters illuminate larger points in the overall battle over public education.

By 2009, out of 95,000 American public schools, fewer than 5,000 were charter schools. So they are unlikely in the short term (or even in the long term) to replace a significant portion of traditional public schools. The larger issues around education reform have to do with how the traditional public schools, run by the government, can be changed. That is why Schnur's Race to the Top would award only a fraction of the points necessary for a state to be one of the winners based on how much or little the state encouraged charters. The most points would go to states that demonstrated commitments to systemic reforms intended to improve their government-run public schools.

Nonetheless, school reformers like Schnur like to point to charters as the experiments that prove the case for those systemic reforms. They argue that the larger significance of charter schools is that the ones that work not only demonstrate that children from the most challenged homes and communities can learn but also suggest how traditional public schools might be changed to make them operate effectively. It can make for an especially compelling argument when a charter school and a traditional urban public school are operating side by side in the same building.