

## 9. Schools guru lauds Ontario: Designer of Obama's education reforms says teaching outshines U.S.

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The designer of Barack Obama's school reforms praised Ontario Monday for out-teaching schools south of the border. United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who is under fire for plans to make schools compete for funding, sparked applause at Ontario's first "education summit" by quoting Premier Dalton McGuinty's recent boast that education in this province outshines that of the U. S.

"The premier spoke the truth; he's absolutely entitled to those bragging rights," Duncan said. "Canadian 15-year-olds are more than a year ahead of their American counterparts in math and science." Duncan was one of several speakers to address some 600 delegates from 12 countries at the summit.

Moreover, Duncan noted "56 per cent of young adults in Ontario have a college degree compared to 42 per cent in the United States." Obama wants to hike the number to 60 per cent by 2020, an increase of some 8 million graduates. Ontario trustees and parent advocates expressed concern this weekend that Duncan was invited to speak, considering he promotes charter schools, linking funding to test scores and merit pay for teachers at schools that score well.

Several challenged him during a question period after his speech at the Royal York Hotel, including James Ryan, president of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, who said he believes making teachers compete for merit pay does not produce better student achievement. Countered Duncan: "The devil is in the details. You don't want to pit teachers against each other in the same building, but we've had too few incentives to get good teachers into low-performing schools and that has to change."

Over the noon hour, McGuinty and Duncan took off their suit jackets and toured Weston Collegiate Institute, where there is a new specialist high-skills major program in manufacturing, designed to help keep teens not interested in academics stay interested in school.

"We have a dropout rate that's too high," said Duncan, noting fewer than 2,000 U.S. high schools produce half of all dropouts, schools he called "dropout factories." Yet with 100,000 schools, 50 million students, 3 million teachers and 14,000 school boards, "systemic change takes time," said Duncan, a former senior official in the Chicago school system.

He also lauded McGuinty's move to start full-day kindergarten in some Ontario schools this fall as "the best investment we can make" in getting children to be more successful in their later school years.

"Half-day kindergarten doesn't work for working families," he added after the pair toured a computer classroom, a machine shop and the auto shop, chatting briefly with students.

America's plan to give more money to high-performing schools - rather than those who do poorly - flies against the practice of every other country except Turkey, noted Andreas Schleicher, special education adviser for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

"An emphasis on competition may make the systems look better, but there is no evidence that it makes any net improvement," said Schleicher, who tracks international test scores and school trends across the developed world.

Michael Fullan, McGuinty's education adviser, warned against comparing Canadian and American schools.