

Education secretary: Stimulus money is for next two years

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The top education official in the Obama administration says that federal stimulus dollars for school districts are meant to be spent over two years, which aligns with the position of L.A. school officials in their ongoing political war with employee unions over looming layoffs.

The comment by Education Secretary Arne Duncan is significant because unions have been campaigning for district officials to spend as much of the stimulus money as needed to save jobs now. District officials have countered that employees must agree to conditional salary concessions if all jobs are to be saved.

District officials have argued that federal stimulus money should be split over two years, in large measure because both years are likely to prove economically dire.

Over past few weeks, the teachers union in particular has cited Duncan's professed desire to preserve the jobs of teachers as justifying a spend-it-now approach.

Duncan fielded the issue in response to a question from the L.A Times during a telephone news conference Thursday about the newly unveiled federal education budget.

"I don't know the details of L.A. obviously," Duncan said. "This is two-year money and so spreading it some—again I don't have any of the specific details there, but just big picture—spreading it between the years makes a lot of sense."

He added that the funding was a one-time only appropriation.

Duncan's statement hardly settles the issue because he didn't say the money had to be split evenly. And members of Congress have suggested they understood their vote favoring the stimulus package was an endorsement of spending what's needed to save jobs now.

Other advocates on the issue speculate about a second stimulus package or they argue for saving jobs now while a political coalition is assembled to increase funding for education.

In his remarks, Duncan noted that saving jobs remains a priority, but he placed a greater emphasis on an underlying imperative of the Obama administration.

"We want these investments to save hundreds of thousands of teachers' jobs around the country, but also [to] drive real reform," he said.

Money spent merely to preserve the status quo will be judged a poor use of federal funds, he said.

“The first question we’re going to be asking every state is what did you do innovatively...with stimulus dollars...to drive up achievement and close the achievement gap,” Duncan said.

Schools, school districts and states that only maintain “the status quo without moving the bar-- they might as well tear up the application” for forthcoming lucrative federal grants, he said.

“They’re not even going to be in the ballgame,” he said. “And so we’re going to watch very, very closely and have both real carrots but also sticks for folks that aren’t doing the right things by children.”

-- Howard Blume