

Praise for  
**HOW SCHOOLS WORK**



“Arne Duncan was one of the most powerful education secretaries in US history. Which is not to say he got his way. In this **SURPRISINGLY CANDID** chronology of his **LIFELONG QUEST TO FIX** America’s schools, Duncan reveals how he learned to run toward angry parents (not away), to recognize the cowardice of certain national politicians (and the courage of others), and to hear the lies that get told about our education system (including a couple that he told himself).” —**AMANDA RIPLEY**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Smartest Kids in the World*

“In *How Schools Work*, Secretary Duncan outlines an **HONEST** and thoughtful way forward for our education system. This book merits every American’s **SERIOUS** consideration because, as Secretary Duncan explains, our children, our economy, and our national security are at stake.” —**Vice President JOE BIDEN**



HOW SCHOOLS WORK



ARNE  
DUNCAN



# HOW SCHOOLS WORK

An Inside Account of  
Failure and Success  
from One of the Nation’s  
Longest-Serving  
Secretaries of Education



# ARNE DUNCAN

After School Matters had a basic requirement, which was that schools needed to stay open into the afternoon and evening. But no sooner did we begin talking about these programs than we were told it was impossible to keep schools open after classes ended, which was often as early as 2:30 p.m.

It was a well-known fact that, according to a clause in the engineers' contract, schools could *only* be kept open if an engineer was in the building. Unfortunately, their contract also stated that if a school's engineer stayed past regular school hours, then he or she would get double-time pay. There was no way the CPS budget could accommodate that. As a result, Mrs. Daley's project was a nonstarter.

I despaired over this, but also refused to believe we couldn't find a solution. I couldn't understand why something so technical could be held up to impede improving the lives of kids. I wasn't so much angry at the engineers as I was angry at a system that allowed this to happen in the first place.

To help see our options, I asked CPS's labor and contract lawyer, a gregarious and outgoing guy named Jim Franczek, if we could renegotiate the contract to take that clause out.

"Hell no, Arne," I remember him saying.

"Then what can we do?"

"We can reread it. Maybe they're wrong about when overtime kicks in. Or maybe these guys screwed themselves some other way and we can get them to come around."

"I'm not interested in leverage, Jim. I'm interested in keeping these schools open so kids can use them."

He grunted before hanging up. I very much appreciate what lawyers do, but in that moment I was thankful I'd come to my senses and not gone to law school.

I hoped he'd find something, not just for the kids but also because the

whole thing felt personal. I didn't talk about it with Jim or too many other people, but the whole reason my mom's program was in a church all those years was the Shakespeare School couldn't or wouldn't stay open after-school to house the Sue Duncan Children's Center. It made no sense to her back in the 1960s, and it made no sense to me at the tail end of the 1990s. School buildings are huge physical assets that are chronically underutilized—sometimes for reasons as pointless as the issue we had with the engineers.

A couple days later Jim called back and said, "Well, Arne, they definitely get that double time if they stay late."

"So we have nothing, then?"

He paused before saying, "Oh, no. We have something. Listen to this . . ."

Jim proceeded to tell me the system had it all wrong. He read me the clause, and it couldn't have been clearer. The engineers didn't have to stay in the buildings at all. *Someone official* had to be there, but that person only had to qualify as the "principal's designee."

"It can be anyone," Jim explained. "A principal could designate the engineer, and in that case the engineer would get his extra pay. But it could also be a teacher, a coach, an assistant, or the principal himself. It could even be the janitor or the lunch lady. It could be an unpaid volunteer, or someone running After School Matters!"

That was all it took—for one smart lawyer to take the time to read the actual contract—to discover the truth. This wasn't so much a lie as it was an urban myth that had been passed down and accepted for years. I still have no idea how it got started, but however it happened, the bureaucracy's inertia perpetuated it. And now it was gone—*poof*. All we had to do was tell people they were mistaken and read them what the contract actually said.

After School Matters was not in the clear, though. One more lie stood in

its path, and it had to do with the mind-set of certain CPS principals.

One such principal told this lie directly to Mrs. Daley and me, and I'll never forget it. We were at an exploratory meeting in 2000, hosting Mrs. Daley and some administrators to talk about starting After School Matters at a small group of high schools. The engineer problem had been solved, and now we had to convince the schools to come on board.

"This thing isn't going to work," I remember the principal saying. His name was Chester Herberts. Chester was a tough old-school principal with a heart of gold, but he'd seen it all and was very set in his ways. "It's not cool for teens to stay after-school. They don't want to hang out here."

Mrs. Daley listened politely but remained steadfast. "Why don't we give it a shot, Chester? It worked out at Block 37"—this was an apprenticeship program Mrs. Daley had been involved in way back in 1991 and that we were using as a model—"It might fail, but don't you think we should try?"

Chester steeled himself. "With all due respect, Mrs. Daley, if we do this, are you really going to come back out here and stay involved? I doubt it." It was an awkward but honest question, and while I didn't say anything, I appreciated that he had the courage to ask what other principals were surely thinking: *Is the mayor's wife really committed?*

Mrs. Daley had the tact not to make an issue of it, respectfully insisting she *was* in it for the long haul. I tried to be supportive, saying, "For what it's worth, I think this'll work, Chester. I've been to schools just this week where security guards were sweeping kids onto the street after the final bell. Those kids are being pushed out into who knows what."

"Doesn't happen at my school," he said, shaking his head.

"Maybe not, but it happens at schools a lot like yours. It's like they said in the movie *Field of Dreams*: If you build it, they will come. I really think they will. If I'm wrong, then it didn't work and we'll shut it down. No harm in trying, right?"

Chester eventually relented. After School Matters started up not long

afterward at his school, and it was an immediate success. With help from local businesses, program providers, dedicated staff, and grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, After School Matters eventually expanded across the city. It remains to this day, and now serves more than 20,000 teens every year. Going back to the original Block 37 program, more than *200,000* Chicago teens have taken part. They've learned about dance, biology, poetry, journalism, sports management, robotics, graphic design, literature, filmmaking, photography, catering, urban planning, and much more—basically anything an engaged person might find interesting or worthwhile.

Less than a year later I ran into Chester Herberts, who was happy to tell me that he'd been dead wrong—about the kids and Maggie Daley too. She quietly and without fanfare visited high schools repeatedly that year to see how her "baby" was doing, including Chester's school. For his part, Chester had seen hundreds of kids flock to the program, and he now saw how important it was to them. Both he and Mrs. Daley would support the program for years, and Maggie Daley chaired the After School Matters board until her passing in 2011.

I loved Chester's honesty throughout—first when he challenged Mrs. Daley and then when he told me he'd been mistaken about his kids. If we—and, more important, our teens—could win over someone like Chester, it gave me confidence that we could win over anybody.

And to think that none of it might have happened if Jim Franczek hadn't carefully read a contract and pointed out an innocent lie none of us had bothered to check.