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## Arne Duncan, U.S. schools chief, gives Minnesota thumbs up

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When U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan visited the Twin Cities a year ago, he admits, "I was tough on Minnesota."

While the state was a national education leader, Duncan said, he didn't feel policy makers had an urgent sense "to go to the next level" when it came to closing the achievement gap between white and minority students.

His opinion has changed, Duncan told state leaders, teachers and community members Friday at Irondale High School in New Brighton.

Duncan noted recent moves by lawmakers to revise teacher and principal evaluations, and secure federal funding for early childhood education from the Race to the Top program, as well as increases in dual college credit programs.

"I'm very excited about the direction the state is going," said Duncan, who appeared with Gov. Mark Dayton and Brenda Cassellius, state education commissioner.

Duncan stopped at Irondale to commend the school's early college program, which is designed to give a broader array of students access to college classes while still in high school.

The visit was part of a swing through Minnesota to discuss college readiness and affordability. Duncan also stopped at South High School in Minneapolis.

"I love the early college program," Duncan said, because it is not just for the "high fliers" who excel in school but also for students who might be in the middle of their class or even at risk of dropping out.

Taking college classes in high school sparks students'

interest and saves them money, Duncan said.

"Think of the confidence boost for a young person" who completes a college class in high school, he said.

At Irondale, two participants in programs for low-income and first-generation college students quizzed Duncan about efforts to cut the federal funding that helps them afford school. Duncan replied that President Barack Obama needed to address budget deficits but was still committed to providing greater access to higher education.

The number of U.S. students earning advanced degrees has "flat-lined," he said, and the nation has fallen to 16th in degree attainment. Obama hopes to reverse that trend, Duncan said.

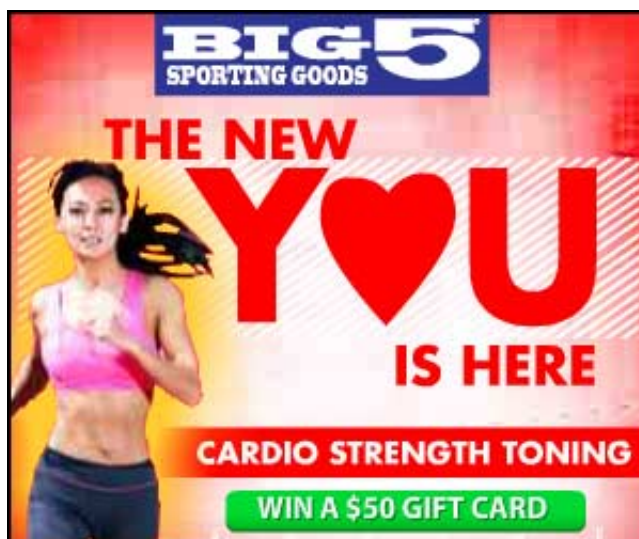
"(Other nations) are out educating, out innovating and out investing us, and we wonder why we struggle economically," he said.

Dan Hoverman, superintendent of Mounds View Public Schools, said the Irondale program was designed to "develop a culture that focuses on post-secondary success."

That focus is not just at the high school level, but districtwide, he said.

The effort will help the state continue to provide employers with an educated and prepared workforce, Cassellius said.

"Today is a visible demonstration of how deeply we





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Minnesotans care about schools," she said.

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