

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

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Ep 102: Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan: Education Runs on Lies

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other news makers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers, and now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman, and welcome to another episode. Today, I'm excited to be here with former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Before becoming Secretary of Education, he was CEO of Chicago Public Schools. President Obama has said, "Arne has done more to bring our educational system, sometimes kicking and screaming, into the 21st century than anybody else." I'm looking forward to seeing how Arne sees education now and what we can do to further improve education and opportunity, especially for our most disadvantaged young people. Welcome, Arne, and thanks so much for being here today.

Arne Duncan: Thanks so much for having me.

LT: My pleasure. Arne, I loved your book, "How Schools Work," and as I've told you, it's one of the most memorable books I've ever read. The first sentence of the book is that the education system runs on lies. Can you tell us about that and about Calvin Williams?

AD: That's a bit of a provocative statement, but I wouldn't say it if I didn't believe it. I'll just give you a couple of quick examples of where I think our words and actions don't match up, and I can tell you about Calvin. So, three specific examples. One, we all say we value education. You wouldn't talk to anyone says they don't care about education. But the truth is, almost no one votes around education. And I always say education should be the ultimate bipartisan or non-partisan issue. There's nothing Republican or Democratic about helping more babies get off to a good start, about raising graduation rates, about trying to lead the world in college completion rates. No one has a monopoly on good ideas, but very few of us go to the voting booth and hold politicians... mayors, congressmen, governors, the President, local, state, national... We don't go to the voting booth and vote with that in mind. And as a result, I think many politicians give nice education sound bites, but don't really invest, and don't hold themselves accountable, and don't put the resources in that we need. So we say one thing, our actions say another. The second one would be, we all say we love teachers; we value teachers.

AD: But I would argue teachers are wildly underpaid, under-respected, under-trained, under-recognized and our words and our actions don't match up. And the final one, and maybe the hardest one is... Talk to 100 adults, 100 would say, "We value our children." But we tolerate a level of gun violence in this country that is wildly higher than basically any other industrialized nation. And so we say we value education, but we don't vote on it. We say we love teachers, but we don't support them. We say we care about our kids; we don't keep them safe... And so I think we are dishonest. I think those are lies, and things that we don't act upon. The story of Calvin

Williams is a deep one. I grew up as a part of my mother's inner city tutoring program, and it had just a formative impact on me, my sister, my brother. We all ended up trying to follow in her footsteps in various ways. But I took a year off between my junior and senior year of college, which is a little bit non-traditional, to really figure out, was her work like a part of who I was? Or was it actually who I was? And most of my friends were going on to go to law school, become investment bankers, or go to Wall Street or whatever it may be. And I didn't quite think that was what I wanted to do.

AD: During that year, I decided I wanted to sort of follow in... Do her work in some form or fashion. I didn't quite know what that meant, but that it was going to be my life's work. And that summer before coming back for my delayed senior year, a young man who literally lived right across the street, right across the corner from my mother's program was... We knew their family well, came over and asked, could I help get him ready for the ACT test? And he was a basketball player, I was a basketball player, he was a lot better than I was, and I was thrilled. Yeah, let's get to work, let's do something. I'll never forget, it was warm, we sat out on the church steps, and just started to do a little work. And in that first session, in the first few minutes, I just saw that he was basically reading at maybe a third or fourth grade level, and it was just beyond heartbreaking for me. He happened to be on the B honor-roll with his high school, in a really violent neighborhood. He wasn't caught up in gangs. In a neighborhood with lots of drugs and alcohol available, he didn't touch anything. He had played by all the rules, and he had no idea how far behind he was.

AD: And it was just devastating. And we did some of his work, but I knew at that point, I just didn't have enough time. Had I started the previous summer, maybe if I would've had a year, but that summer working with him was not going to be enough time to catch him up and have him do well. And he did not really, do anything like what he could have done in college. And just seeing how the system had absolutely failed him, and lied to him throughout his life, that was one of many motivators to make me want to go into education, and really try, and tell young people the truth, and have high expectations for them, and challenge them, and sort of take all the lessons I learned from my mother's program every single day, and try and take those to scale.

LT: How common is it for the grade level standards to be too low; for kids and parents to believe that the kids are meeting grade level standards or are even honor roll students, when in reality they are far behind where they should be?

AD: Well, that happens, unfortunately, in many, many states. That was really the driver between us trying to raise standards and we can sort of talk about the Common Core or whatever... But we all talk about the cost of college being too high, and the cost of college is too high. What we don't talk about is we spend eight to nine billion with a capital B, \$8 to \$9 billion each year on remedial class in college. What that means is young people with a high school diploma go to college and then have to take non-credit bearing classes. Burning through Pell Grants, burning through loans, terrible for them, terrible for their parents, terrible for taxpayers. Nobody wins.

AD: But that's the conversation we don't have. It was true. I talked about it in the book. As you may remember that when I was running the Chicago Public Schools, our test scores were going up every year. We were celebrating. We were feeling great, and then the consortium on Chicago

School Research did a really important study. Illinois, was one of many states that had reduced standards. So we were living that and we didn't know it. And what the consortium did was they did a correlation between "meeting" the Illinois State Standards and taking the ACT. That if you were meeting standards that correlated to a 16 on the ACT, if you get a 16 on the ACT, you basically have a 10% chance of graduating from college. You're not ready. And so we had been lying to kids and families. We didn't know we had. But it was an unbelievable punch in the gut, and so we stopped paying attention to the kids that were "proficient", that was no longer the goal.

AD: The goal was to get kids into an advanced status on the state test. That correlated to a 20 and those numbers for us in Chicago Public Schools were small. So it really wasn't a hugely important impetus for us to push harder, but when you have a measuring stick that shortchanges kids, it deceives them and families. I think that's one of the most insidious things you can do in education, is to sort of give people a false complacency or a false sense of optimism or a false sense of hope when we're actually setting them up for failure down the road. I think it's horrific.

LT: You quote President Bush, who has eloquently said, "The soft bigotry of low expectations." Can you tell us about that?

AD: It's an interesting phenomenon and it's pretty deep. Too often you'll hear, maybe more sense than hear, because people often don't quite say it out loud, but what the sense you'll get is that, well, these kids are poor or these kids are minority students, or these kids are immigrants, or these kids are English language learners. The implication is, there's only so much they can do. Or that if you really want to do well academically, you have to end poverty first. That that's the first thing you actually have to do. And trust me, I would love to end poverty tomorrow. President Biden has taken some pretty interesting steps to reduce poverty, but while we fight those macro battles, we can't not educate kids. And I would argue quite the opposite. The best way I know how to break cycles of poverty is by providing a high-quality education. That's what my mother devoted her life to. Yes, she was an educator, but she was trying to really lift kids out of poverty. And in one generation, we are able to see many families where no-one had any college education, many did not have high school diplomas, the generation that she worked with, go on to be successful and break it.

AD: So I'm passionate about education for all the educational reasons. But my bigger passion is I see education as the best path to help end cycles of poverty, provide some economic mobility, give a ladder up into the middle class. And that's really what my life's work has been about, is trying to create opportunity for young people, for communities that have historically been denied those.

LT: What are you proudest of accomplishing as Secretary of Education under President Obama?

AD: A list of successes and a list of failures I'm happy to talk about all of those, but I'll take the successes. None of this stuff is ever a "Mission Accomplished" moment. It is always you've got so much further to go and you're just trying to accelerate the pace of change and do more. But on things that we're proud of, really proud to put more than one billion dollars behind high quality early childhood education. I will always argue that the best investment we can make is in high quality Pre-K. If I had one additional tax dollar, if you give one more dollar where do I put it?

That's where I would put it. Historically, our department had done very little in the early childhood space. And we're getting our babies off to a good start. Again it's James Heckman here at the University of Chicago, Nobel Prize winning economist, has studied this longitudinally for decades. He talks about a seven to one ROI (Return on Investment). There are very few places where investing in a public sector activity gives you \$7 back, less teenage pregnancy, less drop-outs, less incarceration, more young people graduate from high school going on to be productive citizens. So big play there.

AD: Secondly, we were able to get high school graduation rates up to all-time highs, and they're
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still not high enough. The dropout rates are still too high, but having historic highs and seeing every subgroup at historic highs: White, Black, Latino kids, Asian, English Language learners, poor children, special needs, whatever it might be. Every subgroup improvement, I felt great about that. Invested very heavily in community colleges. I think those are some of the unrecognized gems along the education continuum. And we did a lot of partnerships with the Department of Labor. Then we were able to put an additional \$30 billion into Pell Grants. It was a fascinating Washington lesson. We basically cut out the middle man, literally without going back to taxpayers for a nickel. We just cut out the middle man, did the lending internally ourselves. That was wildly controversial there, but we thought it was common sense. We went from 6 million to 9 million Pell recipients, a 50% increase. We had another million students of color, go on to college, and it felt great about creating opportunity for young people who had worked hard, but weren't born with the silver spoon in their mouth and needed those Pell resources to make that college dream a reality.

LT: One of your most ambitious efforts, as Secretary of Education was the Common Core education standards as an attempt both to make US schools more challenging and to make the curriculum more similar from state to state. Can you tell us about that? How effective it's been, and what more we can do.

AD: The concept again is for me pretty basic, but this one was wildly controversial. It's just simply trying to make sure that if young people graduate from high school, they can take credit-bearing classes in college. They don't have to take remedial classes. That was literally all we were trying to do. We weren't setting a national standard, and we know about local control and education. What we were saying is that if you're in Texas, you just need the University of Texas to certify that your state standards are good enough, so you can go to the University of Texas and take a college level class. Same for Wyoming and California, whatever it might be.

AD: Significant progress, didn't mandate anything. Put some incentives out there for states to do this and to do this together. I've always said the fact that we have 50 different yardsticks, 50 different states measuring how we're doing educationally, that's never made sense to me. If you follow a sports team in a newspaper, there's one score for that game, there aren't 50. If you invest in the stock market in a publicly-traded company, you can look at the newspaper every day or look online and find out the stock price for your company. There aren't 50 ways to measure value. It's not an accident in education. It's very intentional. I think it's a way to keep things opaque. It's a way to not be clear, not be transparent.

AD: And so we were able to get many states to work together and to raise standards. Initially, it went extraordinarily well. What we didn't foresee, Lynn... And I'm no good at branding or marketing... this is a joke, but it's really true, that we did not foresee the rise of the Tea Party and the pushback against President Obama. You had "Obamacare," and that was supposed to somehow stigmatize it, and Obamacare got translated to "Obamacore" in education, so we got political pushback on that. And in hindsight, rather than calling it the Common Core, which was pretty innocuous, we probably should've called it the "Very Uncommon, Unique to All 50 States Core," and the "Buckeye Core" and the "Hoosier Core" and the "Illinois Core," [chuckle] whatever. What happened is a lot of controversy. You had many states rebrand, which is fine, but keep 90-95% of standards.

AD: So we were able to make some real progress, but with the benefit of hindsight and sort of understanding the pushback... And I'm always honest. My interpretation of much of the pushback was less on the substance and more really a racist reaction, quite frankly, to our first African-American President, and that anything he was trying to do, whether it was to provide healthcare or provide a better education, was going to be resisted, not so much on rational terms, but on more emotional terms. I have zero regrets for doing it. Definitely, with the benefit or the wisdom of hindsight, would've branded it and marketed it in a different way.

LT: There is not a single other country in the world that has 50 different systems of education as we do in the US. One of your other focuses was the increased use of data in education, including standardized tests to determine how schools, students, and teachers are performing. How is the United States doing with standardized testing now, and how can we best use it?

AD: Well, I'll say relative again... As you said, we live in a globally competitive economy. And so we're not competing for jobs... Wisconsin versus Illinois versus Indiana, where I live here in the Midwest. We're competing with jobs with India and China and South Korea and Singapore. And so in order to compete, we have to try and win that. And the good jobs, the middle-class jobs, the higher wage jobs, are going to go to where the skilled workers are. We're in a flat world now, and I worry desperately about those jobs leaving our country and going to other countries where there's more of a skilled and educated workforce. So for me, this is not really about education, it's really about trying to keep us globally competitive, and with an economy that can thrive and with an upwardly mobile population, because of education opportunity creating economic opportunity. So if you look at... whether it's reading or math scores or whatever it might be, we're usually somewhere between 15th and 30th percentile. On access to pre-K, I think we're 28th or 29th now. College completion rates... We led the world a generation ago. It's interesting, we've flat-lined, other countries passed us by. We're about 12th now.

AD: So the hard truth, Lynn, is that we're top 10 in nothing. Early childhood, K-12, higher ed. And I don't think that's acceptable. I don't think we can be complacent. And we should be challenging that every day and not just resting on our laurels or resting on our glory days from a couple decades ago. So I do think... Again, test scores don't tell you everything by any stretch, but I also think it's an important benchmark to know where you are. And it's actually a very interesting debate now, with the pandemic and so many kids so far behind and a couple million kids not even in school, which is devastating to me. And there's a debate of whether we should

assess kids or not now. And I just don't know, Lynn, honestly, how do you help kids catch up if you don't know where they're strong and where they're weak?

AD: I had my annual checkup for the doctor recently, [chuckle] and what does the doctor do? She doesn't just start prescribing me a bunch of medicine. She asks me how am I doing and how am I feeling and what's going on. She assesses my health before she does anything. And I think we need to be assessing kids where they are educationally. And those that are high-flying, great, let's help them move; and those that need more help, let's get them more help. But I don't know how you help kids in an effective, efficient way if we don't know where we are. And I worry that because maybe we're a little embarrassed or we're a little ashamed or because it's a hard truth, we shy from those things. And I just think it's really important not to guess, but to know. What kids' strengths and weaknesses are, how best to help them, and then to hold us as adults accountable, particularly now, for helping tens of millions of kids who are pretty far behind after this past horrific year in education. We got to help them catch up as fast as we can.

LT: You've seen now generations of students from pre-K all the way through lower school, middle Page 5

school, and upper school, as CEO of Chicago Public Schools and as someone who's worked with students now for decades. What are the most important predictors for student success in lower school, middle school, and high school?

AD: I'll just go back to my mother's philosophy [chuckle] And it's like yesterday. Five decades ago, she said, see where kids are, find out where they are and just take them from there, and you'll have kids come to you that are a couple grade levels ahead or a couple of grade levels behind. You'll have kids that are really fast learners at some things and slow in learning other things. You have kids with one passion or another, and for me, the predictor is much less what kids bring to the table and much more what we as adults do to meet them where they are and take them where they need to go... The benefit, I've had of a lifetime of experience of seeing kids who happen to live in all black, all poor, very violent neighborhoods, many do extraordinarily well and do things that theoretically should be impossible, and none of this is easy, but I saw what they could do. Because I saw the difference in the impact my mother and her volunteers had in their lives.

AD: And so the predictor isn't race, the predictor isn't social economic class, the predictor isn't neighborhood, the predictor is educational opportunity and support and guidance and staying with it for the long haul, and I will say the best teachers, it's obviously partly a significant intellectual on helping kids expand their thinking, but so much of this is the heart and really helping young kids to believe in themselves, and to believe that even if no one in their family's ever gone to college, that they have the capacity to do that and to believe that they belong in that environment and exposing them to a world of opportunity that they don't know exists. It's hard to aspire to a career or profession that you've never heard of or you don't know anyone who has. And so where you have love and opportunities and support and guidance, that's the best predictor of student success. It's not whatever strengths or challenges they bring to the table when you first meet them.

LT: Are there other predictors such as, for example, reading behind grade level in third or fourth grade, or absences from school? Can we tell the kids that are in danger of falling behind?

AD: In a heartbeat. You look at attendance. K, first grade, or whatever. Every child wants to go to school. If you get a 90... 90%, that's an A, that's pretty good. If you have 90% attendance, let's take the average school year is about 180 days, if you have a 90% attendance, that means you're missing 18 days. You're basically missing a month of school. That's not good and if you're missing two months of school or three months of school, that's never the child's choice, that is something really wrong or challenging your dysfunctional going on at home. So yes, that is absolutely, for me, the earliest predictor way before there's a grade or a test. If students are coming to school, and they're on time, that just tells you something about the kind of support they have at home. And if they're struggling to do that, those are kids that you have to pay an extraordinary amount of attention to and do that as early as possible.

LT: Another critical issue that you focused on is crime and the disproportionate impact on young black men, and this is especially true in major cities like your home city of Chicago. As a country, we have addressed crime primarily with one tool, enforcement. How should we think about crime and what else can we do, especially for young people?

AD: Well, yes, it is crime but it's actually violence and very specifically gun violence that I'm focused on. And you're right, we have basically had an incarceration strategy a lock them up strategy. We in the United States have I think, 4% of the world's population, but 25% of the world's inmates that are, as you say, disproportionately black and brown men of color. And let me be clear, I think if people commit a crime, they should absolutely be held accountable, but what we don't do is we don't invest in these communities, and we don't invest in these people. And where there is high unemployment, where there is inferior education, where there is inferior health care, where there is lack of access to quality food, when there's disinvestment in communities, I guarantee you, Lynn, you will see higher crime and higher violence. And that's honestly a choice that we have made and with the pandemic, there's this new term, socially distanced.

AD: Well in the communities I work in, 15 neighborhoods in South and West Side of Chicago, they have been socially distanced for decades, and we haven't used that term, but they've been red-lined, they've been disenfranchised, they've been marginalized and they've seen capital leave. And the violence, the crime, that's the manifestation, that's the blood pouring out of the wound, but this wound has been caused by all these other things. And so what we're trying to do is give our young men and young women who are caught in these horrific cycles of violence, a chance to change their lives and do a number of things where we have amazing street outreach team that recruits young men and women into our program. We have life coaches for every single young person. We have a clinical team in amount of trauma that folks here are living with and lived with all their lives. Frankly, it's pretty extraordinary.

AD: We have an education team; we've had lots and lots of folks get high school diplomas which has been amazing. We got a small set in college now, and then we have jobs team, and our goal is to move people from the illegal economy, which in places like Chicago, almost inevitably

leads to violence, leads to gun violence, to the legal economy. And it's been the hardest thing I've ever done, the most heartbreaking, but by far the most inspiring as well.

LT: Tell us about Chicago CRED.

AD: Yeah, we're just laser focused on reducing gun violence in Chicago. Violence is not unique to Chicago, but it's uniquely bad. We're about six times more violent than New York. We're about three to four times more violent than LA. It does not have to be that way. It should not be that way. And what just both breaks my heart and it motivates me is our children who grew up in the South and West sides. Literally, literally every single one knows at least one person who has been shot. It is often multiple people. When I go to classrooms, I'll say, "How many of you know... Five people who have been killed, 10 people who have been killed... 15 people who have been killed." And you get up to that and a half to a third of the room's hands are still in the air. And it's obviously never our kids' fault... And my whole life, I've talked about deferring gratification and going to college and all that, and obviously I still believe that, but when you're literally trying to survive day to day, particularly for our young men who honestly don't believe they're going to live past 18 or past 21 and that's a rational... That's not an irrational thought, that's a rational reaction to the war zones, to the environment they're living in. Then when I'm talking about college and stuff, I'm speaking a foreign language. I'm speaking Greek.

AD: So I'm really just trying to give our kids and our communities a chance to just to grow up healthy and safe. And we made some significant progress the previous three years. This past year 2020 with the pandemic with the pandemic, with George Floyd's murder, we took a big step in the wrong direction. We got more violent. So we have a lot of hard work ahead of us this year, and going forward to try and continue to make Chicago as safe as other major cities on the East and West coast.

LT: What can we as Americans, as parents, and as caring people, do to improve the circumstances and the opportunities for disadvantaged young people?

AD: I think the pandemic has taught us so many lessons, but the good and bad... But one of the biggest ones is just how interconnected we are. That none of us are okay, if we're not all okay. And that if my family is healthy, but our neighbor's family's sick, well, we're all at risk. We can separate geographically, we can separate by community, we can separate by gated community, but it's really understanding our common humanity. This is the most humbling work I've done. I've learned so many tough lessons every day, but probably the biggest lesson is not to judge. I got a million crazy stories, but one of our guys told me he said, "Arne, I grew up in a household full of guns. And I wish we would have had toys, but we had guns." And guess what, he grew up to be a pretty big shooter and created a lot of mayhem and havoc and destruction. He's doing much, much better now, but I thought about... Both my parents are educators, and my sister, brother and I grew up in a household full of books.

AD: And guess what, all three of us became educators. We followed in their footsteps. It does not make me or my family any better than him. It's just we're all at some levels, creatures of our environment, shaped by our environment. And so what can we all do? We can do whatever we can to create opportunity and to not judge and to give other people's children the same kinds of

opportunities and supports and guidance and love that we try so hard to give our children. On one hand, you could say it's altruistic, and yes, that's true. But obviously more than ever that our fates are intertwined, are interconnected. So you can almost do it in a selfish way. But if you want what's best for your children, one of the best things you can do for your children is to make sure other people's children are doing well as well.

LT: Arne, before I ask for your three takeaways, is there anything else you'd like to discuss that you haven't already touched upon?

AD: No, I appreciate the conversation and thoughtful questions, I've enjoyed it.

LT: What are the three key takeaways that you'd like to leave the audience with today?

AD: A couple, I think one, that education should be the ultimate bipartisan issue, and that no one has a monopoly on good ideas. And I would plead with the folks listening and watching, to vote in part at every level, local, state, and national, for the candidates that are going to create educational opportunity in your community. And that I don't hold politicians responsible for not being committed here, I hold us as voters irresponsible for not holding them accountable to do the right thing, so please vote. I don't care, liberal, conservative, Democrat, Republican. I truly don't care. Please vote based upon education. Secondly, that we're top 10 in the world in nothing, and so the status quo is not good enough. How we reimagine education, how we reinvent, how we move from a K-12 system to a Pre-K to 14 system at a minimum. We have to do a much better job, both for education, but also for economic reasons.

AD: And then the third one would be to never judge or never discount. You can't tell a book by the cover. And I can give you countless examples of young people I grew up with, young people I worked with, who by any normal prediction should not be contributors to society, but are doing extraordinary things as contributors to society because they had educational opportunity with people who loved them. Maybe judge less and invest more.

LT: Arne, thank you so much for all you have done to improve education and opportunity for all of our young people, and thank you for our conversation today. This has been terrific.

AD: Thanks so much for the opportunity. Have a great day now! [music]

OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)