

Newsweek

TEDDY'S RIGHTFUL HEIR

BY JONATHAN ALTER

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Alan Khazei should get his seat

Ted Kennedy's death got plenty of coverage, but the battle to replace him in the Senate has been overshadowed by elections this week in New Jersey and Virginia. While all four candidates in the Dec. 8 special election in Massachusetts are liberals in the Kennedy tradition, only one is carrying forward his reform ideas—and those of President Obama—on the most important domestic issue of the 21st century.

It's not health care—the politicians will work something out soon enough. It's education. If we don't tuck in our shirts and pay attention to educating the workforce of the future, we're going to flunk as a nation. The days when we could write off millions of young people and expect to survive economically are over.

Kennedy worked closely with President Bush on the flawed and deeply unpopular No Child Left Behind Act. Like a packaged-goods company with a tainted product, the Obama administration has left that name behind and now calls its program the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, LBJ's original title in 1965. But the accountability-and-standards movement Kennedy and Bush launched is essential, and Obama has moved much faster than expected to advance it. He and Education Secretary Arne Duncan are showing some Chicago muscle and giving states a "choice" right out of *The Untouchables*: lift your caps on the number of innovative charter schools allowed and your prohibitions on holding teachers accountable for whether kids learn—or lose a chance for some of Obama's \$5 billion "Race to the Top" money. Massachusetts recently lifted its charter cap and nearly a dozen other states are scampering to comply. Now that's hardball we can believe in.

This issue cleaves the Democratic Party. On one side are Obama and the reformers, who point out that we now have a good idea of what works: KIPP and other "no excuses" charter models boast 80 percent graduation rates in America's roughest neighborhoods, nearly twice the norm. On the other side are the teachers' unions and their incrementalist enablers in the political class. They talk a good game about education but make up phony excuses for opposing real reform and accountability.

Three of the four Senate candidates are enablers. Rep. Mike Capuano, who backed charter caps, argues that charter schools have funding advantages over conventional schools when the truth is

just the opposite: charters usually have to pay for their own buildings. He objects to teacher evaluations that "cannot capture significant demographic differences in student populations." That misstates Obama's reform proposal, which doesn't compare apples and oranges but would simply assess if individual students showed improvement between September and June. Attorney General Martha Coakley makes similar union-backed arguments and dodges the threshold questions on charter caps and measuring teacher effectiveness (by means that can include, but are not limited to, student scores on standardized tests). Boston Celtics co-owner Steve Pagliuca, the rich guy in the race, supports lifting the charter cap but hedges on assessing teacher effectiveness. Duncan doesn't view these as technical edu-wonk issues but as central to Obama's whole education policy.

That leaves Alan Khazei, a nonpolitician who has raised some decent money but still lacks name recognition. You may remember a photo of Kennedy wearing a bright-red jacket when he came home from the hospital. The jacket came from City Year, the pioneering national-service program Khazei co-founded in 1988. Bill Clinton used City Year as the prototype for AmeriCorps, which is now nearing 600,000 Americans enrolled. After helping to save AmeriCorps when the Republicans threatened it with extinction, Khazei worked closely with Kennedy on a big expansion of the program that Obama signed this past spring. Khazei is running a *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* campaign and already has thousands of young volunteers. More important, he's the only candidate in Massachusetts who stands fully with the president on education. "Building the world's best education system is no longer just a moral imperative because our children deserve it," Khazei said in a well-informed speech last month. "It is the key to our economic recovery and the backbone of our international security." Obama will be saying something similar in Wisconsin this week as he stumps for reform. Shouldn't he get some first-class help in the Senate in trying to achieve it?