

From Checker's Desk

Chester E. Finn Jr.

Recent and lasting columns on education by the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C.

The G.O.P. Education Opportunity

Will President Bush and his invigorated Republican allies in Congress seize their new opportunity to reshape federal education policy for the twenty-first century?

One can hope.

Education, as many have noted, loomed small during the campaign, save for the "yes I did, no you didn't" wrangling over the adequacy of NCLB appropriations. The president tendered some nebulous and generally predictable ideas for the second term, notably the suggestion that high schools be brought under the NCLB accountability mandate. Mr. Kerry mostly talked about spending. And sundry voter surveys indicate that, as one might have expected, education was not much on voters' minds. (Most of those who said it was a key consideration favored the Democratic ticket.) Nobody can be sure if that's because the candidates failed to make the topic significant or because people are simply more concerned about other things.

Immediately after his victory, the president enumerated his high-priority agenda items for the second term, and he included education on that list. But how he talked about it is revealing. His other domestic initiatives could be termed part of the "ownership society." They would empower individuals and families to make their own decisions and direct their own resources: shaping their own social security, finding the health care that suits them, keeping more of their after-tax income, setting aside funds for the college of their choice, etc. Only when talking about K-12 education did he speak in terms of institutions, indeed of governmental institutions: "make public schools all they can be" was the key Bush phrase. Here he spoke of providers, not consumers, of the delivery system rather than its clients.

There is, of course, much to be said for improving the K-12 delivery system and plenty of reason to focus on high schools. The real fall-off in U.S. achievement begins in the middle grades and worsens after eighth grade, and we have evidence aplenty that, even as a woefully large number of young people fail to graduate from high school, a huge fraction of those who do are unprepared for college-level academics or the modern workplace. (See the new ACT study we reviewed last week.) We can also anticipate that any serious federal effort to strengthen high-school education and hold these schools to account for their results will bring controversy galore. (For example, what about the 25 states that have so far opted not to institute a high-school graduation test? Should Uncle Sam press them on this?)

Yet something is wrong with this picture. Focusing on high schools, important and

worthy as it is, is also what John Kerry would have done as president. It has nothing in particular to do with the election results. It has little to do with the GOP mandate, such as it is, or the "ownership society." And it has naught to do with the moral values and faith issues that are said by most analysts to have shaped the election results—and differentiated Republicans from Democrats.

The proper GOP focus these next four years would be to bring the ownership society into primary-secondary education by invigorating and accelerating America's progress toward universal school choice. That's the K-12 equivalent of giving people a say over their health care and their social security investments. Give them a say over where (and how and from whom) their children learn. Not so much over what they learn; the core of the curriculum, in my view, is properly subject to statewide (or even national) academic standards and test-based accountability. That's where NCLB comes in, along with its extension to the high-school grades. But that has little to do with the delivery system or with choice among schools.

There are innumerable ways in which this goal could be advanced from Washington. Let me mention just five:

1. Turn NCLB's dual promise of "public school choice" and "supplemental education services" into reality by erasing the boundaries that constrain those choices (e.g., school districts), creating alternative mechanisms to operate these programs in states and districts that are hostile to them, seeding thousands more charter schools, and making it harder for states and districts to obstruct their spread. (As has happened in New York, for example. See "Sharp decline in transfers to new schools," by Elissa Gootman, *New York Times*, November 11, 2004.)

2. In the reauthorization of I.D.E.A.—one of Congress's many pieces of unfinished business—give families across the land the option of a Florida-style "McKay" scholarship program so that disabled youngsters can be educated in the school their parents think is best for them. (See "Vouchers for disabled youngsters" for more.)

3. Underwrite the spread of virtual schools and virtual charter schools, thus bringing the benefits of enriched curricula and high-quality instruction, as well as educational options and modern technology, to rural and small-town America and to home-schoolers. (There's even a foreign-policy angle here. Virtual schooling is a terrific way to beam the lessons of democracy into third-world villages and households whose governments—or mullahs—don't want them to learn such things.)

4. Following the new District of Columbia model, make federally subsidized voucher programs available for low-income youngsters in communities that are ready and willing to accept such programs.

5. Using consumer-friendly systems such as GreatSchools.net, bring specific information about school offerings and performance to parents across the land so that they can make informed choices among schools—and do their part to hold schools account-

able for results. (NCLB contains the seeds of this, with its testing data and demand for school report cards, but translating that information and getting it into the hands of parents remains a huge challenge.)

Five worthy federal policy initiatives—and that's just the tip of the choice iceberg. (I did not, for example, include pre-school, summer school, or after-school.) If Mr. Bush wants a lasting education legacy from his second term, he should do for the empowerment of parents what, during his first term, he did for the accountability of schools. He might even find a measure of support among Democrats who have figured out that it's neither sound policy nor good politics to remain joined at the hip to the public-school establishment. (See, for example, Andrei Cherny's provocative discussion in *The New Republic* (subscription required) of an "ownership agenda" for Democrats.) And sure, it's fine if Republicans and Democrats also work together to set U.S. high school education on a new course.

November 11, 2004

Three Cheers for Rod Paige

Outgoing education secretary Rod Paige is a great education reformer and distinguished public servant who leaves office after four years of accomplishment, candor, non-stop dedication to America's children, and loyal service to the Bush administration.

With Cabinet members exiting in droves, it's hard to know for sure who's being nudged out the door and who is leaving on their own volition. Paige had signaled that he was game to stick around a while longer, but the White House reportedly wanted a four-year commitment, which is a lot to ask of a seventy-one-year-old. So as he packs to return to Texas, let us dwell not on the circumstances of his departure but on his achievements, his legacy, and his character. "We all serve at the pleasure of the president," he told his staff, "and it is perfectly appropriate that I leave now."

Rod Paige wasn't perfect in this role. He is not, for example, a great public speaker when working off a prepared text. (He is wonderfully eloquent, sometimes thrilling, when he speaks from the heart.) He tends to voice the truth as he sees it, even when it upsets folks. (One can scarcely forget his apt—if politically incorrect—comparison of the NEA to a "terrorist organization" or his terrific *Wall Street Journal* critique of the NAACP leadership.)

What he was, however, what he is, is a dedicated educator of children and crusader for better breaks for the poorest and neediest among them. A black man who rose from the humblest start in Jim Crow's Mississippi, a product of segregated schools, he became a teacher, coach, administrator, counselor, dean, school board member, and, in time, the reforming superintendent of the largest school system in Texas.

He left that post to travel to Washington at Mr. Bush's behest and there he led the Education Department for four eventful years. He didn't always have the leeway he should have to lead it as well as he could. The White House tether was shorter than in

previous administrations, far shorter than when I worked there with Bill Bennett in the late 1980s. Paige had limited authority to pick his team and less to pick his policy targets.

He is, for example, a stalwart believer in the power of school choice, both to create opportunities for children and to put transformative pressure on "the system." But (save for the new D.C. voucher project and the valiant efforts of the Department's small "innovation and improvement" office) this has not been a choice-minded administration. Indeed, the person named yesterday to be Paige's successor, White House policy maestro Margaret Spellings, is a standards-testing-accountability booster who can be counted upon to defend and extend the No Child Left Behind act, but who has signaled that the only way to fix American K-12 education is to lean on "the system" from above, not to empower its clients. A smart woman, Bush loyalist and skilled staffer, perhaps Spellings will demonstrate in her highly visible new role that she has more than one policy gun in her arsenal and the personal attributes that will cause people to want to follow where she leads. We wish her well.

Back to Paige. A short tether, yes, but he made the most of his position. He tirelessly barnstormed the country, talking of the need to boost achievement and leave no child behind. He implemented NCLB with conviction and steadfastness, occasionally nudging it toward a bit more flexibility and reasonableness. That epochal statute is now, in Paige's words, "indelibly launched. A culture of accountability is gripping the American educational landscape."

The secretary also did his best, despite yawns at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, to revamp teacher training and certification; to reform the special ed program (which showed some results yesterday when the Congressional conference committee finished work on it); and to make overdue changes in higher ed and vocational ed. He invested the Education Department's skimpy discretionary dollars in boldly reformist initiatives, such as the American Board for Certification of Teaching Excellence. He oversaw a wholesale revamp of the Department's research and evaluation functions, including wider use of experimental designs (even control groups!) in most federal studies.

Though scarcely noted by the press, Paige also shaped up the Education Department's tattered management and accounting systems. (He was helped in this venture by such able colleagues as Bill Hansen, Gene Hickok, and John Danielson). The agency is, for example, getting its third consecutive "clean audit," which may not sound like much but is a lot better than the alternative—and tons better than what he inherited from the Clinton team.

Some of his other accomplishments will bear fruit after his departure, such as rigorous appraisals of curricula and instructional programs by the new "What Works Clearinghouse," regulations that open the door for single-sex schools, and Washington's most successful outreach effort to community- and faith-based organizations.

Along the way, Rod Paige showed himself to be a good boss, effective leader, friend to many, and thoroughly decent human being. But he never let the grown-ups get in the kids' way. He is a children's educator, not a panderer to adult interests.

And time and again he used his bully pulpit to address the moral imperative of gap-closing and to frame civil rights correctly for the twenty-first century. Read, for example, his superb Harvard address on the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board*

decision. In fact, while you're at it, read a selection of Paige's speeches and statements, which you can find here. This isn't just the oeuvre of a dutiful federal official. It's the work of a dedicated educator, a serious reformer, a rigorous thinker, and a courageous man.

I'm going to miss Rod Paige. So will America's children.

November 18, 2004

The Blind Men and the High School

It's on everyone's lips: the NEXT BIG THING in education reform is a serious focus on high school. That's what the president wants to do, what the Gates Foundation wants to do, what a vast array of think tanks and education groups want to do.

"Redesigning the American high school" is this year's focus for the National Governors Association, which will co-host a "National Education Summit on High Schools" in February. A week back, the Education Department held its own high-school "leadership summit." This tide is rising fast.

Much, in fact, has already happened. The feds held at least two earlier conferences. (They produced some interesting papers; [click here](#) and [here](#).) Worthy outfits like Jobs for the Future have also gathered in the multitudes and batted ideas around. (Some of these can be found in *Double the Numbers*.) Gates has been plugging away for several years, especially with its "small schools" strategy. We at Fordham joined with Achieve and the Education Trust in the American Diploma Project. Even the Aspen Institute has made this a recent focus of its high-altitude meditations.

To date, however, the results are slim. Much of American high-school education remains sorely afflicted, both by sky-high drop-out rates and by weak academic achievement among those who stick it out. It's past time for concerted attention to these problems and nothing we've done yet has made a big difference.

But no consensus has even emerged on what changes are needed. So let's begin by sorting out the options. As I deconstruct a cornucopia of ideas for high-school reform, they group themselves into six broad themes. (Mind you, many projects and programs mix and match them like post-modern pizza chefs.)

1. Strategy: Extend standards-based reform to high schools by holding them to account for their students' achievement, completion rates, etc. A number of states have begun to do this and the president has proposed, in effect, to bring high schools more fully under the umbrella of No Child Left Behind.

Problem definition: Schools aren't accomplishing all that they could because they haven't been accountable for their results.

Theory of action: Get the standards and assessments right, then hold schools (and districts, states, etc.) responsible for their performance, forcefully intervening (and perhaps allowing school choice) in the event of failure.

2. Strategy: Establish high-stakes graduation tests that students must pass to earn their diplomas. This, too, is a results-based accountability system, but it bears down primarily on the kids rather than the institutions. Join "tough" with "love" via positive inducements to succeed in high school, such as state-funded college scholarships for those with B or better averages.

Problem definition: Students aren't working hard enough, taking the right courses, or learning enough because it doesn't "count." Today, all they must do is go through the motions and rack up the course credits.

Theory of action: Incentivize them with a judicious mixture of carrots and sticks.

3. Strategy: Prevent drop-outs and maximize completions by making the high-school experience more appealing: individualize it, eradicate boredom, let students move at their own pace, etc. This is the thrust of Ohio's new task force report on "High-Quality High Schools," of the president's proposed \$200 million "Performance Plan" fund, and of private-sector programs such as Amer-I-Can. Also create new education options for "out of school youth" and drop-out recovery programs for those who have fallen off the turnip truck.

Problem definition: Too many kids are turning off, tuning out, and dropping out. If they don't stick around, there's no way they'll learn.

Theory of action: There are two, really, but closely related. One says that if young people like school more (and, presumably, succeed at it), they'll hang in there. The other says that well-conceived specialty schools and programs can re-engage young people who have had it with formal education of the conventional sort.

4. Strategy: Devise new institutional forms for secondary education: "Early college" high schools, small high schools, schools-within-schools, charter schools, "KIPP" high schools, virtual high schools. Much has been said and done on this front, and the innovations take many shapes, as do the choice schemes whereby young people and their parents can access the version that works best for them.

Problem definition: The circa-1950s, one-size-fits-all, "comprehensive high school" is dysfunctional and off-putting for many, besides being an inefficient, out-moded vehicle for teaching them what they need to learn.

Theory of action: Create new options for delivering and receiving secondary education, using technology, modern organizational theory, out-sourcing and the like, then give young people choices.

5. Strategy: Beef up the curriculum. Make "AP" courses ubiquitous and propagate the International Baccalaureate. Strengthen state academic standards. Re-do the textbooks. Team up with colleges in K-16 programs. Make college-prep the "default" curriculum. Blend higher ed's expectations with those of "modern" jobs, à la the American Diploma Project, and work backward through the K-12 grades.

Problem definition: They're not learning because the courses are easy, boring, pointless and ill matched to the real world's demands.

Theory of action: Stretch their minds, make it worthwhile and they will learn it.

6. Strategy: Get practical. Focus on "Tech Prep" programs, ventures that join high schools to community colleges, work-study, schedules that blend school with jobs, volunteerism and community service, and kindred ways of tapping into the "affective," pecu-

niary, and social sides of young people.

Problem definition: Academic work and intellectual activity are no way to the adolescent heart.

Theory of action: Realize that what animates teen-agers is reality, not theory; things with tangible rewards and sleeves-rolled-up engagement, not textbooks.

One could slice these six strategies differently, one might even turn them into seven or eight, but you get the point. Observe how disparate they are, arising from divergent conceptions of the main problem and warring assumptions about what needs to change and how to go about it. Recall the blind men and the elephant. Each thought he was dealing with a different beast, depending on which portion of the creature he was touching. High school reform in America is not the work of blind folks, but today it resembles a cafeteria of radically different schemes based on dissimilar theories and rival diagnoses.

To put the best face on it, we're in a period of experimentation, mixing and matching, combining and refining, arguing and trying. Perhaps we're wise to pursue all these strategies and their permutations on grounds that one size truly doesn't fit all and that we don't yet know what, in the end, will work best for whom. But let us also recognize that this is a formula for much confusion—and new tensions if, for example, Washington moves to clamp a single policy regimen upon all of it.

December 9, 2004 ■