
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.

Education President?

Last week was “education week” for John Kerry’s campaign, during which he unveiled a series of proposals that likely comprise the main education plank of his platform. They definitely warrant a look, though in part he seems to be recycling Al Gore’s ideas from 2000—and also Gore’s chief strategy: a deft balancing of crowd pleasers, teacher pleasers and demagoguery, all resting atop billions in “new” money. These proposals are supposedly shielded from rival spending priorities via a “trust fund” arrangement whose cash will come from raising taxes on well-to-do Americans. The platform covers a lot of territory and, as usual in a campaign, contains a mix of the astute and the absurd, some well developed notions, others ultra-hazy. For example:

More money for effective teachers in return for some teacher quality improvements, including speedier mechanisms for dismissing bad teachers. This is Gore redux—and not half so bold as Kerry himself was in 1998

when he called for “ending teacher tenure as we know it.” Still, it’s the best of his ideas—IF one can picture Congress insisting on the “give back,” i.e., stipulating that this money will only be available to states that get serious about offloading weak teachers and overriding contracts (and union opposition) to give more pay to good ones. Else this proposal morphs into a new federal teacher-pay supplement, minus the conditions that could make it worth enacting. The NEA has doubtless figured that out—no doubt the reason this key Kerry supporter isn’t denouncing its candidate for heresy.

Some nebulous proposals to boost high-school graduation rates, centering on tutoring, mentoring, and tougher enforcement of a squishy NCLB provision that calls on states to curb their dropout rates.

Several schemes for making higher education more affordable, headlined by the spectacularly bad idea of giving everyone a \$4,000 annual tuition tax credit. Just picture how greedy U.S.

colleges, feeling pinched by state legislatures, would respond to the discovery that almost every one of their students suddenly has four Gs in his pocket to be used for paying tuition.

This week is education week for the Bush campaign, which continues to sing the praises of NCLB—beyond its merits, considerable as those are—while trotting out a series of Clintonesque mini-proposals, many of them fine (e.g., improving twelfth grade NAEP) but none amounting to a big idea.

No wonder the president's re-election campaign has been faulted for its dearth of meaty domestic-policy ideas and what one commentator terms a "very, very weak" White House policy-development process. In education, they never really got beyond NCLB, which was a whopping big idea but which deals mainly with reading and math in grades three to ten and the consequences for schools that don't teach enough of it and kids who don't learn enough. (To be fair, NCLB addresses scads of topics. But it was yesterday's news and even its fans acknowledge that years will pass before it shows much effect on U.S. education. In any case, since Kerry voted for it and seems to buy its main precepts, its campaign salience has shrunk to arguing over whether enough is being spent on it.)

It's common knowledge in Washington that the administration has been AWOL on most other education policy debates of the past few years. It had next to nothing to say about the

Higher Education Act, was barely audible on vocational education (though a belated proposal has just popped out), and—despite terrific recommendations from an outside commission—essentially a non-player on special ed. As for Head Start, the White House offered stellar reform ideas, then bungled this domain's tricky politics. And when it comes to the school lunch program, if the Bush team has played any role in that reauthorization, it must have been under cover of darkness.

This isn't necessarily the end of the story. Several of these major education laws won't get completed by the molasses-like 108th Congress, so will return to Capitol Hill next year. Hence there's still time for the White House to devise serious proposals for how to rework these hoary, troubled programs as boldly as it did with NCLB.

But reforming extant federal programs is a Potomacentric way of seeing the education world. In an election, what's needed are either small, grabby proposals or big, important ideas that reach past the Beltway. The White House needs no help with the former. Regarding the latter, they may need a hand. Herewith, five suggestions:

Pre-school for every child who needs it. Not day care—quality pre-school, voluntary, with a serious pre-literacy curriculum built in, with families able to choose among competing providers, and with a sliding price scale that subsidizes only those who need it. A big idea indeed for a Republican. (In a perfect world, Head Start would be folded in.)

Ensure that every young person learns the country's history. Bush has access to proposals aplenty here, starting with those of Humanities chairman Bruce Cole and Senator (and former Education Secretary) Lamar Alexander. There are a hundred ways to approach this, but any serious plan must include testing kids' knowledge of U.S. history—and holding schools to account for whether their pupils learn it

Principals. (Kerry is already onto this one.) Press states to eliminate today's dumb certification rules for school principals. Instead, think of them as CEOs and pay them CEO-level wages linked to their schools' performance. Empower them to make big decisions. Perhaps create a new nationwide principals' corps—expert leaders deployed to schools that need them—or fund states that devise their own.

Choice. This rivals standards-based reform as the big idea for transforming K-12 education in the U.S.—and Kerry dares not go there. Bush could be as bold on this front as with standards-testing-accountability and could place the GOP squarely on parents' side. Choice can be advanced in any number of ways. For starters: voucherize special ed (à la Florida's McKay Scholarship Program); replicate the D.C. voucher program in fifty more cities; re-energize the flagging charter-school movement; enact Senator Alexander's new "Pell Grants for Kids" proposal.

Are we getting our money's worth from college? America should press for accountability from higher ed just as from primary/secondary schools. Let

the Democrats demand more money to pay the soaring price of college. Republicans should demand that colleges become more efficient and prove that their students are learning. Professors will fulminate, sure, but their institutions get more than \$15 billion a year in federal aid (not counting billions more in aid to their students) and the taxpayer deserves to know what it's buying. If Congress doesn't complete work on the higher ed act, there's even a handy legislative vehicle.

Only the first of those suggestions carries a sizable price tag. The others, by Washington standards, can be done for relatively little money. Though it's commonly assumed that big numbers impress a jaded electorate, Republicans never win bidding wars in education. Far more important to be the party of big ideas than the party of big government. Let Kerry run on that platform. He's off to a swell start.

May 13, 2004

Florida: Getting it all together?

During a recent visit, I was, frankly, wowed by the comprehensiveness and courage of Florida's education reforms, and depressed by the crummy coverage they're getting in both state and national press, not least the heat they are now taking for holding their schools to high standards under NCLB and accepting the sanctions meted out to schools for not meeting adequate yearly progress. I suppose it has to do with the press's disdain for NCLB, the public's reluctance to accept that their

school is not doing well, Florida's pivotal role in the upcoming election, and Governor Jeb Bush's relationship to the incumbent president. (He is, by the way, one of the half dozen smartest, savviest, gutsiest "education governors" I've met in the past quarter century.)

What one may term Florida's purposeful education reforms—those that policy makers have intentionally put in place—can best be described under six headings.

(1) Integration across levels. Florida has reorganized the structure and governance of its education system so that the phrase "K-16" means something. The same state agency runs the whole shebang, with three "chancellors" (K-12, community college, higher ed) working under a single commissioner. The postsecondary sector has been enlisted in worthy teacher-preparation initiatives, dual enrollment for high school students, and one of the country's best-engineered transfer arrangements between two- and four-year institutions. At the other end, Florida is embarking on an ambitious universal (but voluntary) pre-K program meant to help prepare young children to succeed in school.

(2) Standards, testing, and accountability. Florida's "Sunshine State" standards are eight years old and the state test, known as FCAT, has been in place since 2001. It now covers grades 3-10, and passing it is a condition of high-school graduation. It is a high-stakes system for students at that point and, more recently, in third grade—part of a multi-faceted plan to ensure that

everyone is reading by fourth grade. Though the graduation requirement has occasioned protests and evasions, it's beginning to yield results. Mostly, though, the "A+" accountability plan bears down on schools, which get rated in reading, math, and writing according both to how many students meet the state's standards and how many are making gains. The result is a school grade that brings real consequences, of which the best known is the students' right to exit low-performing schools for better ones, including private schools. Though few have actually done this, there is evidence that the mere prospect of students departing with "Opportunity Scholarships" in hand has concentrated educators' minds and boosted the results of weak schools. Whereas 28 percent of Florida public schools were graded "D" or "F" in 1999, four years later this was down to 6 percent. As best I can tell, that's with no grade inflation.

(3) School choices. Besides the A+ vouchers, Florida has two other kinds. The nation's largest publicly funded voucher program (almost 14,000 in the just-ended school year) is the "McKay Scholarship" plan for disabled youngsters, now beginning to be emulated by other states. Florida also boasts a sizable privately funded scholarship program "incentivized" by corporate tax credits. (11,500 kids benefited this past year.) Additionally, the state has several hundred charter schools (serving 68,000 children) and recently liberalized its program so local school boards won't have the last word on whether

charters can exist. Plus, there's a nifty array of on-line options, including the much-praised Florida Virtual School.

(4) Instructional improvement. Florida has embarked on an ambitious early-reading program that includes parent workshops, retraining teachers, platoons of reading coaches and specialists, and summer "reading camps" for low-scoring third graders. Despite some educator guff, it's also serious about the statewide use of "scientifically based" primary reading programs.

(5) The education workforce. Fewer than a third of Florida's entering teachers today come straight from the state's own colleges of education. Many arrive from other states, from ambitious alternative-certification programs and from the "reserve pool." A fascinating innovation has authorized community colleges to offer competency-based teacher certification programs—and to award bachelor's degrees. (St. Petersburg College just graduated the first fifty products of its new education program.) Florida has also developed a statewide teacher career path akin to the Milken approach, giving extra pay to high-performing teachers and rewards to those with advanced certification (today from the National Board, tomorrow from multiple sources). The other day it also joined the ranks of states ready to certify teachers who pass the entry-level tests of the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (and participate in a "mentoring" program")

(6) Smart, analytic decision making. Plenty of states have tons of educa-

tion data, but Florida is beginning to use it for interesting analyses of school efficiency and a host of revealing disaggregations and comparisons. (For example, they can now set school grades alongside the same students' FCAT performance.) I can't tell how much use of such information is made by district and school leaders, but the folks in Tallahassee no longer operate an education system based on hunch or hope; today it's centered on imaginative uses of hard data.

Let me not gush. In 2004, Florida still has a long way to go, even as its highly prescriptive class-size reduction initiative, passed by referendum in 2002, threatens to sop up all available education dollars for the foreseeable future, leaving little for reforms that might do kids more good. The state's academic standards in some subjects leave much to be desired. The choice programs have been plagued by a few high-profile scandals brought on by ill-behaving private schools—and a silly deadlock (more personality clash than policy disagreement) in the final days of this year's session kept legislators from enacting needed repairs. The charter school program is still cramped. It's no rose garden, not yet. But it might be the most impressively integrated and comprehensive set of education reforms I've seen in any big state.

And there's evidence that it's starting to have a salubrious effect on student achievement, especially for poor and minority youngsters, at least in the early grades. Florida was, for example, the only state to post significant gains

on the NAEP 4th grade reading test in 2003, gains that spanned the ethnic spectrum. (Math wasn't so great.)

The FCAT results are brightening, too, both in reading and math and, again, mainly in the early grades and among minorities. But some high-school indicators are inching up too, including graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students.

Nobody in Florida suggests that all is well, only that progress is being made, that it's measurable results-style progress, and that it antedates No Child Left Behind. Indeed, Florida suffers more than most from the layering of NCLB requirements atop its own accountability system. The state's school grades give much weight to improvement, not just absolute standards, and therefore Florida has witnessed big-time confusion as schools getting high marks under A+ are deemed to be "in need of improvement" under NCLB. Because of the Governor's unique situation this year, Florida cannot openly fuss that NCLB might have some problems. There is reason to expect, however, that after Election Day, Florida officials will embark on a vigorous effort either to get that law (and/or its regulations) revised or to win some of the "flexibility" that other jurisdictions have obtained in recent months.

Based on what I've been able to learn, education reform in the Sunshine State deserves a lot more admiration than it's been getting.

June 17, 2004

Napping 'til November

On Tuesday, the Democratic Convention adopted a platform containing a three-page education plank that offers something for everybody, but nothing in particular, save for a pointed three-paragraph dig at George W. Bush. Insofar as one can detect policy impulses in the fog, however, many of them resemble what Republicans also say. Think of them as standard education pabulum circa 2004: attention to "fundamental skills" and "fundamental values," "a great teacher in every classroom," closing learning gaps, higher graduation rates, citizenship education, parent partnerships, school choice (confined, for Democrats, to charter and magnet schools), making college affordable, etc.

The closest the platform comes to a provocative idea—and the closest that John Kerry has come—deals with teachers. In 1998, you may remember, he gave a much-noted speech that called for "ending teacher tenure as we know it." (He also urged that every public school become "essentially a charter school.") It seemed, for one brief shining moment six years ago, as if he might be breaking from the Democrats' ancient obeisance to the teacher unions.

A remnant endures in the new platform, presumably written by the Kerry team: "We must raise pay for teachers, especially in the schools and subjects where great teachers are in the shortest supply. . . . At the same time, we must create rigorous new incentives and tests for new teachers. . . . And teach-

ers deserve due process protection from arbitrary dismissal, but we must have fast, fair procedures for improving or removing teachers who do not perform on the job.”

Note that the “incentives and tests” apply only to new teachers. The word “tenure” is never used. It’s a pale shadow of 1998. Indeed, it’s muted since May 6 when Kerry said (per the *Los Angeles Times*) that “he would provide states more than \$20 billion over the next decade to hire more teachers and raise their pay in return for new efforts to weed out poorly performing instructors. . . . Kerry would require all states receiving the new federal money to toughen the tests used to certify new teachers. Even more dramatically, he would require those states to simplify the process for teacher dismissal.”

Predictably, the NEA threw a fit and summoned Kerry for career counseling. And the candidate has since eased off. Now he murmurs “due process” first, then suggests “improving or replacing teachers who do not perform on the job.”

OK, not a complete flip-flop. Sort of a cartwheel.

A new Brookings analysis of education proposals advanced thus far in the 2004 campaign sorts them into four categories and says this about Kerry’s:

Preschool. “Senator Kerry has said that he wants to make preschool universal. However, in the interest of keeping deficits under control, he has backed away from a specific proposal in this area.”

Elementary-Secondary. “Kerry advocates exempting education spend-

ing from [his proposed] cap on discretionary spending by proposing a ten-year \$200 billion entitlement to the states for education spending. . . . Roughly half the total . . . would be devoted to No Child Left Behind (the signature Bush education law).”

After-school. “Kerry has proposed to expand and revamp the 21st Century Community Learning Center Program . . . from \$1 billion to \$2.5 billion . . . [and] shift the focus from exclusively academic benefits to include emphasis on values and decision-making skills that encourage children to avoid drugs, crime, and other risky behavior.”

Higher education. “Kerry proposes to reduce the cost of attending college by expanding tuition tax credits for most households . . . from \$1,500 to \$2,500; they would be available for four years instead of two; and they would be made refundable.”

Are you yawning yet? With the White House proffering equally drab ideas so far (e.g. taking high school more seriously), it seems likely that the 2004 education debate is going to hinge on spending levels, not ideas.

Kerry is dashing around dangling dollars—notably to the teacher union conventions earlier this month. There’s the new \$200 billion education “trust fund,” to be financed by raising taxes. There’s \$27 billion to “fully fund” No Child Left Behind. There’s a recent promise to “fully fund special needs education,” too.

It’s instructive to compare this Democratic platform to the 2000 version and to note how much gutsier and more eloquent was the education plank

that Messrs. Gore and Lieberman ran on. Though smug about the Clinton record, it went on to say that “every teacher should pass a rigorous test to get [into the classroom]....Every failing school in America should be turned around—or shut down and reopened under new public leadership. . . . [N]o high school student graduates unless they have mastered the basics of reading and math. . . . Parents across the nation ought to be able to choose the best public school for their children. . . . High-quality, affordable pre-school should be fully available to every family. . . . The achievement gap between students of color and the rest of America’s students should be eliminated.”

And all that to be accomplished in a single presidential term! Sky pie, sure, but ideas to stir the education blood, goals worth aspiring to. One might suppose Bush’s four-year push for school reform would invigorate his rivals to demand even greater change than Gore-Lieberman did. But no. In this campaign, pabulum reigns.

The editorial writers at *USA Today* recently accused Kerry of being “absent on school accountability” and to urge a “Sister Souljah moment” wherein he distances himself from the unions. At both of their July conventions, however, the senator declined to follow that excellent counsel.

Bottom line: the teacher unions remain in charge of the Democrats’ education policies and Kerry-Edwards refuse to rile them. Hence the ticket’s position boils down to this: “We sort of agree with Bush about what’s wrong with American education and yes, we voted for his bill, though we now have misgivings, but we promise to spend buckets more than he will and we’ll make sure that education reform doesn’t upset the educators.”

Anyone for a nap 'til November?

July 29, 2004 ■