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Bush Launches Presidency With Focus on Education

Attends Swearing-In of Paige

Calling the event "the beginning of a new era in public education," President Bush last month attended the swearing-in ceremony of Rod Paige as U.S. Secretary of Education. The ceremony was part of a weeklong series of activities designed to highlight the primacy of education in the new administration.

In what amounted to a convergence of bipartisan support not only for the new secretary but also for education's standing as a national priority, an assembly of senators and representatives from both major parties joined the president and vice president at the event.

"My administration has no greater priority than education," Bush said at the ceremony. He described Dr. Paige as "a man of integrity, a man of common sense, a down-to-earth man who knows how to get the job done." Saying he and Paige share the same basic commitment, Bush pledged, "We'll work to bring excellence to all public schools all across America."

Echoing the president's commitment to improve public schools, Secretary Paige said in his inaugural address, "When each and every child in this country can receive a quality public education, we will have made history together." Paige praised the president for proposing a "clear and detailed" plan for improving public schools and for establishing the goal that "no child be left behind in a failing school." He said the administration has a sense of urgency about making classrooms safe, teaching children reading and math, and "closing the inexcusable achievement gap that exists among students attending public schools across this country."

Paige seemed confident that the administration and Congress could make "education reform the law of the land," and promised to work with Department of Education staff to "serve the needs of our students."

Unveils Blueprint for Reform

Establishing education as his top priority, President Bush last month sent a blueprint for school reform to Congress that would give states and schools greater flexibility in implementing federal programs while at the same time holding them accountable for academic achievement.

"Educational excellence for all is a national issue, and at this moment is a presidential priority," Bush said during an announcement event in the East Room of the White House. "My focus will be on making sure every child is educated."

Although the new president's blueprint includes a broad range of initiatives, the one attracting the most media attention is the proposal to allow disadvantaged children in chronically failing schools the option to use Title I funds to transfer to private schools. "When schools do not teach and will

not change," the president said, "parents and students must have other meaningful options." His plan would provide approximately \$1,500 to children in low-performing schools that failed to show improvement after three years of enhanced effort and resources. Bush defended the measure by saying, "An accountability system must have a consequence; otherwise it's not much of an accountability system."

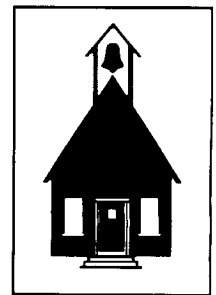
Private schools chosen by students using the federal grants would, according to the plan, "be subject to appropriate standards of accountability."

In addition to the Title I component, the president's education package contains other measures to promote parent choice. One is a proposal to increase the cap on education savings accounts ten-



U.S.D.E. Photo by Dave Snyder

Vice President Richard Cheney administers the oath of office to Secretary Rod Paige as President George W. Bush looks on.



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fold, from \$500 to \$5,000, and to allow their use for K-12 expenses. Another is the establishment of a fund "to demonstrate, develop, implement, evaluate, and disseminate information on innovative approaches that promote school choice." The plan also calls for funds for the creation of charter schools.

E-Rate

While the school choice items are an obvious area in which the president's proposal intersects with private education, other elements of the plan could also affect private schools. For instance, the proposal to turn the E-Rate into a Department of Education grant program could influence private school participation in the program. Bush's plan would streamline the application process by combining the E-Rate with existing technology grant programs and distributing the funds by formula to states and districts. The money would be targeted to high-need schools, as is currently the case, though it is not clear whether "need" would exclusively reflect a school's poverty count or might also reflect its actual need for technology.

By making the E-Rate a direct grant, the president's proposal would transform the program from what is essentially a subsidized discount arrangement between schools and vendors into something more akin to government aid. A fear in the private school community is that, depending on how the program is fashioned, the new grants could come with new restrictions on how the funds are to be used, or could even subject a school to general government regulations unrelated to the E-Rate.

Block Grants

Another point of private school concern with the president's plan involves the call to collapse a host of existing government programs into fewer flexible categories. On the one hand, if the statute governing the consolidation is

clear regarding the equitable participation of children and teachers in private schools, the refashioned program could actually expand the areas of federal aid



CAPE PHOTO
Secretary Paige greets well-wishers after his swearing-in ceremony.

in which some private schools take part. But on the other hand, a poorly designed consolidation statute, which left it entirely up to states and school districts to determine how to target funds, could produce local programs that preclude private school participation. If a state, for example, were to decide to use its share of consolidated funds exclusively to hire new teachers, and there were no provisions in the statute for an

equitable set-aside for alternative programs for private schools, the students and teachers in those schools could conceivably be shut out.

Other Items of Interest

Other elements of the president's blueprint of interest to private schools include:

- the option for religious organizations to apply for grants to run after-school programs;
- exemptions for private schools and home schools from federal testing requirements;
- a new reading program for the early grades;
- a teacher tax deduction;
- funding for charter school start-up costs;
- increased funding for IDEA.

The president described his proposal as a framework for bipartisan legislation to be developed by Congress and the administration in the near future. To be sure, the transformation of his blueprint into legislative language will require careful attention on the part of the private school community in order to make certain the needs of all the nation's students are met and no child is left behind.

The president's 30-page blueprint for school reform, *No Child Left Behind*, is available on the Web site of the U.S. Dept. of Education at www.ed.gov.

Bush Choice Plan Sparks Reaction

President Bush's plan to allow children receiving Title I services in persistently poor-performing public schools to use federal funds to attend alternative schools drew immediate reaction from members of Congress on both sides of the school choice debate.

House Majority Leader Dick Armye (R-TX) called the school choice measure "the most important element" of the president's education package. "No other reform has a greater potential to improve the lives of poor children in failing schools," Armye said.

Rep. John Boehner (R-OH) the newly elected chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee, also defended the parent choice proposal. Following a meeting between President Bush and the chairmen and ranking members of the House and Senate committees that have initial jurisdiction over the president's plan, Boehner said that if a school fails to improve after three years of trying to do so, "we have to think about the child that's involved. Looking the other way, like we've done over the last several decades, is criminal behavior on the part of policymakers." He added that serious steps have to be taken "to make sure that every child has an equal chance at a good education."

Reacting to the same meeting, Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA), ranking member of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, praised the president for making education a "strong priority," and emphasized what he called "overwhelming areas of agreement and support" between Congress and the administration on the topic of education. He noted the issues of accountability, quality teaching, literacy, early intervention, and focusing resources on children at risk as areas around which agreement was substantial. But on the mat-



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NCES Issues Report on Technology in Private Schools

Although private schools have made significant strides in the past few years when it comes to providing students access to computers and the Internet, many of them still have some distance to go before they catch up to public schools. A report released last month by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) describes the state of telecommunications in U.S. private schools and compares those schools to their public counterparts on various measures of technology. The differences are sometimes stark.

One measure of the sophistication of a school's technology program is the percentage of instructional rooms with access to the Internet. According to the report, which covers private school statistics for the 1998-99 school year, 25 percent of instructional rooms in private schools that year had Internet access, compared to 5 percent in 1995. A separate survey by NCES showed that in 1999, 63 percent of public school classrooms had computers that accessed the Internet.

The percentage of Internet-connected instructional rooms varied significantly from sector to sector within the private school community. Nonsectarian schools were out in front with 41 percent of classrooms hooked up; Catholic schools had 27 percent; and the NCES catchall category of "other religious" schools had 18 percent.

The number of students per instructional computer is another indicator of a school's use of technology. In 1998-99, there were eight students for every instructional computer in U.S. private schools, compared to six students per computer the same year in public schools. The ratio of students to instructional computers was 6-to-1 in nonsectarian schools, 8-to-1 in Catholic schools, and 9-to-1 in other religious schools.

Lack of money for hardware and software purchases was cited most often

by private schools as an obstacle to acquiring or using computers and advanced telecommunications. Sixty-eight percent of schools said insufficient funds were a major (45 percent) or moderate (23 percent) barrier.

Students Per Instructional Computer

All Public Schools	6
All Private Schools	8
Nonsectarian	6
Catholic	8
Other Religious	9

Surprisingly, 19 percent of schools said, in effect, that money was not an issue.

Yet, despite the obvious need for telecommunications funds, only 24 percent of all private schools said they had applied for discounts under the 1998 E-Rate program. (The Catholic school application rate was 51 percent.) Of the schools that did not apply for the E-Rate, half said they had never heard of the program and a quarter said the application process was too complicated.

Computers and Advanced Telecommunications in U.S. Private Schools, 1998-99 is available on the NCES Web site at <http://nces.ed.gov>.

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ter of parent choice for Title 1 students, Kennedy said directly, "We have differences."

Compromise Possible?

Some moderate Democrats, including Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, introduced their own reform package on the same day Bush announced his plan. At a news conference to unveil the package, Lieberman said that while he supported voucher demonstration programs in the past and would continue to do so, he could not support the president's plan to use Title I funds for vouchers. But in response to a reporter's question about whether a demonstration voucher program might be



CAPE Photo
John Boehner (R-OH), new chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee, at a school choice breakfast on Inauguration Day sponsored by Children First America.

an acceptable compromise to the Bush proposal. Lieberman left the door open, saying, "Nobody's been creative enough to make that suggestion before this morning." He questioned, however, whether there would be enough votes in Congress to pass such a measure.

Sen. Evan Bayh (D-IN) suggested President Bush would be "principled and pragmatic" with respect to his parent choice proposal. The president, Bayh surmised, would fight for vouchers because he believes in them, but in the end he would not walk away from a voucher-free compromise that provided most of what he wanted.

President Bush, meanwhile, seemed ready to fight for his proposal to give students in failing schools the chance to attend a public or private school that works, though he left himself considerable bargaining room. In a Saturday morning radio address to cap his weeklong blitz on education, the president said, "My plan will give every failing school a fair chance to improve, but there will be a deadline, a moment of truth when parents are given better options and their children are given a way out." Acknowledging some "differences of opinion" about what those options should be, Bush said he was "willing to listen" to other approaches as long as the final package is based on this principle: "Children and parents who have had only bad choices need better choices."





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• With two executive orders last month, **President Bush** established offices in the White House and in five government agencies, including the Department of Education, to “coordinate a national effort to expand opportunities for faith-based and other community organizations.” In announcing the program, Bush said, “When we see social needs in America, my administration will look first at faith-based programs and community groups, which have proven their power to save and change lives.”

The White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (White House OFBCI) will support a government effort “to enlist, equip, enable, empower, and expand” the work of faith-based organizations and to ensure that such organizations have the opportunity to compete for government contracts “on a level playing field,” according to the executive order establishing the office. The Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, to be established by March 15 in the Department of Education and four other cabinet agencies,

are supposed to coordinate efforts “to eliminate regulatory, contracting, and other programmatic obstacles” to the participation of religious and other non-profit organizations in the provision of social services, and to involve such organizations “to the greatest extent possible” in department programs and initiatives.

The president made clear that his executive orders were not intended to support the religious activities of faith-based organizations, but only to eliminate government discrimination when they deliver social services. “As long as there are secular alternatives, faith-based charities should be able to compete for funding on an equal basis and in a manner that does not cause them to sacrifice their mission,” he said.

• School choice already exists in every city in America, says Milwaukee **Mayor John Norquist**. It isolates people by race, divides people by income, and is “almost vicious” in its outcomes for poor children. The choice Norquist is talking about is what wealthy people exercise when they move to the suburbs

to avoid urban public schools.

Speaking at the National Press Club at a news conference of members of the Democratic Party who support school choice, Norquist noted that the debate about vouchers in Milwaukee is for all intents and purposes over because, as he put it, school choice works, is popular, and is something parents value as part of the package of urban amenities.

The mayor observed that the federal government and most states already provide assistance to help students attend the public, private, or religious college of their choice, and he predicted that support for K-12 choice would one day be recognized as a basic right in America. “The natural desire of parents to have their children succeed in school is something that’s very fundamental,” he said.

The news event, entitled “Building Strong Cities: How School Choice Helps Public and Private Schools,” was sponsored by the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO). More information about BAEO may be found on their Web site at:

<http://www.baеоonline.org>

baeo

Black Alliance for Educational Options

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