



Achievement and Opportunity: Keys to Quality Education

Governor Jeb Bush

Jeb Bush is the governor of Florida. This is an edited version of remarks he delivered at a Manhattan Institute luncheon in New York City on July 6, 1999.

Our efforts in promoting the Bush/Brogan “A+ Plan for Education” were not about avenging the teachers’ unions, or even about ensuring parental choice. Indeed, there are many people who believe it is morally correct for parents to have the right to choose where their children go to school. I do too.

Simply, the A+ Plan is about something everybody in our state agrees is important: student achievement. Our focus is on making certain that children gain a year’s worth of knowledge in a year’s time. If the children of Florida can gain 12 years’ worth of knowledge in 12 years’ time, they will be able to close their eyes at night and dream about being anything they want to be. It is really that simple.

For far too long now public education has not focused on student achievement. It has not been about the children at all, but rather about parents and interest groups. People on the outside of the system angrily complained that those on the inside didn’t “get it.” And the people inside the educational establishment worked to fortify and protect the status quo rather than concentrate on student achievement. In Florida, we have decided

that we need to remain focused on student achievement and not on politics.

The reason for this focus is simple: more than half of our fourth graders read below basic levels. By the time a student reaches fourth grade, he or she must begin to acquire knowledge. If a child has not gained the needed reading, writing and mathematical skills by then, that student will falter and ultimately fall behind.

In our state 52 percent of the students do not even graduate from high school. This statistic is heart-breaking. Every study shows that you are unlikely to achieve a high income if you do not have a high school degree.

The strains on a society that cannot educate its young people are apparent. During my gubernatorial campaign I had the opportunity to visit many family law courts and prisons. I witnessed societal breakdown firsthand, and I found that lack of education was the common denominator.

In finally moving to a child-centered system in Florida, we started with three basic premises. The first premise was that increased

accountability is essential. You cannot build a new system unless it is accountable to everybody. Second, we would not tolerate failure. This entails ending social promotion. We would no longer allow excuses about society's influence on our kids. We put aside apologies about poverty, family structure or race and simply stated that Florida no longer tolerates failure. Third, instead of being system driven, we would focus on our children.

These three guiding principles led to a plan that starts with the idea that student performance must be accurately measured. Most regions in this country use "norm-referenced" tests. With these tests, parents receive testing results that say "Little Johnny" is in the 26th percentile. This percentile does not measure anything. It could mean that Little Johnny did not accomplish anything academically; it could also mean that he learned a great deal. All it shows is where Johnny stands relative to the other students who took the test.

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In Florida, we believe that every child is capable of learning and that we ought to focus on individual achievement. We test students based on the Sunshine Skills Standards in grades three through 10. Results are assessed on an individual basis.

In order to create results that are not norm-referenced, we begin with students' scores from the previous year, and after one year's time, we test students again to see if they have gained a year's worth of knowledge. We have begun the process of building a child-centered system by comparing a child's

progress to rigorous educational standards instead of to the progress of other children.

Our next move was more controversial. After moving from norm-referenced to standardized testing, we decided that each school would be graded on student achievement. We graded schools on how well they were achieving the goal of guaranteeing that each child gains a year's worth of knowledge in a year's time. In Florida today, every school is graded on an A through F scale.

We didn't listen to those who argued that our rating system was insensitive. Many said that it was wrong to use the letter F because it connotes failure. That is *exactly* the reason we used it.

Seventy-nine schools in our state currently have a grade of F, and more than 300 schools are rated D. The majority of the schools are rated C. Only a very few are rated A or B. This has been a wake-up call for our state. It is important to recognize that in this second step we are grading schools not on the many circumstances that children bring to schools, but rather on what goes on inside of each classroom.

The third step in our plan was to reward schools for educational improvement. Every school in Florida receives \$100 per student when individual grades go up, or when a school is A rated.

This idea also met with controversy, though its purpose is clear. We reward success. If an F-rated school improves its grade to D, it will receive a grant of \$100 per student. For a middle school with a thousand students, that is a lot of money. The principal, and the school advisory committees that primarily include

parents, decide how that money is spent. If schools continue to show progress, they continue to receive additional funding.

Fourth, as we raised expectations for our students, we also eliminated social promotion, the practice of advancing students to the next grade level without regard to their academic achievement.

The argument has been made that ending social promotion will hurt Little Johnny's self esteem. Self esteem *is* very important in a child's development. But learning a year's worth of knowledge—learning to read, write and to calculate math—is a whole lot more important for Little Johnny. In the long run, Little Johnny's self image is going to be far stronger if he gains the power of knowledge.

The idea of ending social promotion is not to have 15-year-old kids in the third grade. The idea is to enable third graders to acquire the remedial help that they need in order to gain a year's worth of knowledge in a year's time.

We believe in these changes and are financially committed to making them work. We have set aside a pool of \$527 million for schools to use in any way they see fit. It is time for schools to organize for the benefit of children and not allow them to fall behind.

It broke my heart to go to high schools where ninth graders were reading at fourth grade levels. How could we as a society allow that to happen? Is it not better to simply start in the fourth grade and say, "Enough of this nonsense?" We are making sure that kids learn a year's worth of knowledge in a year's time before it is too late. Now that we have begun that process in Florida, it has been

exciting to watch people in the system begin to change their priorities to make sure that we are successful.

The next step in our plan generated the most attention and controversy. We said that when a school has been rated F for two out of four years, that school would be defined as a failure, and the parents in those schools would be given other options.

First, parents would be given the option of a newly revitalized school on that same campus. Secondly, they could send their children to the public schools of their choice. Finally, they could receive opportunity scholarships. The scholarships would enable them to choose a private school for their child, religious or non-religious, so long as the private school admitted all applicants, accepted the opportunity scholarship amount as full tuition, and used the same standardized tests as used by our public schools. Those were the only requirements included in the final bill.

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The contention created by the inclusion of opportunity scholarships in our plan has been just the catalyst necessary for public school reform to work. All across the state of Florida, public school administrators who have neglected their students are now refocusing their efforts in new and innovative ways.

It has been exhilarating to witness. In three weeks, roughly 60 parents of students in two inner-city schools in Pensacola will be afforded

opportunity scholarships. Those students will attend one of five schools that have opted into our plan: one Montessori school and four Catholic schools.

What is truly exciting, however, is the veritable revolution taking place at the two failed schools. Those schools came to my cabinet to get approval for their new plans: they are now the only traditional public schools in the entire state of Florida where the principals can hire any teacher they want or transfer any teacher out of their schools. A waiver of the collective bargaining agreement has been created to allow that to happen.

What is truly exciting, however, is the veritable revolution taking place at the two failed schools. If it were not for the fact that parents were given opportunity scholarships, these schools would not have changed.

In those two schools the mobility problem which has been such a detriment to inner-city students has also been addressed. When kids must move back and forth because their parents have to find another place to live or a new job, it becomes difficult to provide consistent education. In those two schools, however, transportation will be provided for students to ensure that they remain in these schools for a full year so that they can acquire a year's worth of knowledge in a year's time. In those two schools there is also an extended school year from 180 to 210 days.

These schools now require parents to be able to have parent-teacher conferences every six weeks. Before, conferences were not required at all. The focus is now entirely upon improving the schools, but the only reason that this is true is because parents were given other choices.

If it were not for the fact that parents were given opportunity scholarships, these schools would not have changed. Instead, we are experiencing a renaissance in public education in Florida because this governor and the Florida Legislature trusted parents to make choices for their children.

The strident opponents of opportunity scholarships also say that we are taking money away from public education. This is simply not the case. In fact, we have recently poured an additional \$1.4 billion into public education, a 7 percent increase. There are 40,000 new students entering Florida's public school system each year. There will never, however, be 40,000 kids in Florida who need opportunity scholarships in any given year. Public education will remain, but it has to change to become more viable. We need to ensure that children are not left behind.

Our plan does that. So far, the schools that are failing are 99 percent African-American. Ninety-five percent of the kids who attend these schools are qualified for a full school lunch program. I can assure you, this is not some kind of elitist plot.

The other argument against scholarships is that only the concerned parents will take their children out of the qualifying schools, and the remaining kids will be left in failed schools. Once again we have found the opposite to be the case. Just as in a business that has undergone Chapter 11 bankruptcy and the ensuing reorganization, these schools end up significantly more dynamic and directed. This is what is happening in Pensacola, and this is what will happen across the state as schools have to be reorganized.

The success that we are seeing now has made all of our hard work on these issues worthwhile, though I enjoyed campaigning on this issue. As the campaign progressed, education reform quickly became the number one issue, and exit polls showed that our side won the debate. A Republican candidate with a provocative plan of action to improve public schools won the debate. I believe that this created a strong mandate to implement our plan.

It has been a great experience, but the most exciting part of all of this was when we held the bill signing. I had the chance to be with three parents from Pensacola, one of whom, Domicra Williams, was there with her precious daughter, Jessica. She was a little five-year-old girl, dressed up beautifully. She was very tired: it was a long trip from Pensacola. They left at four in the morning, and only arrived in Tallahassee just in time for our press conference.

Jessica fell asleep on my shoulder during the event. Afterwards her mom told me, that while they were driving that morning,

Jessica had been telling her that when she grew up she wanted to be a pediatrician.

Here was a five-year-old girl who closed her eyes and dreamed about something far better than what many people would give her credit for.

Jessica's mom wanted her child to get the very best possible education. I believe that because of our legislation there will be thousands of Ms. Williamses out there now that will be given that chance. It will be these parents who will affect educational change across the country. It won't be the politicians. It will be the moms and the dads who want the very best for their children, but sense that they are trapped in failing schools.

I'm excited about being a small part of a system that will enable Jessica to pursue her dream to become a pediatrician. We could use a few more in our state, and Jessica will be a fantastic one because she is going to get a world-class education.

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