Governors from New York to California aspire to be known as the “education governor.” Few hold better claim to the title than Florida governor Jeb Bush, who left office in January after two action-packed terms.

During his eight years in Tallahassee, the governor established a far-reaching accountability system, including limits on social promotion in elementary school; introduced a plethora of school choice initiatives (vouchers for the disabled, vouchers for those in failing schools, tax-credit funded scholarships for the needy, virtual education, and a growing number of charter schools); asked school districts to pay teachers according to merit; promoted a “Just Read” initiative; ensured parental choice among providers of preschool services; and created a highly regarded system for tracking student achievement.

His agenda was ambitious and controversial: Florida’s Supreme Court declared vouchers unconstitutional. Over Bush’s opposition, voters approved a constitutional amendment mandating a costly reduction in class sizes. And the new governor, Charles Crist, has altered the composition of the state’s education leadership, raising doubts about how long the Bush reforms will remain intact.

Shortly after Jeb Bush left the gubernatorial chair, he talked with Education Next about lessons learned, key triumphs and mistakes, and advice he’d give to would-be “education governors.”

The Big Picture

Education Next: Many promising education reforms were implemented in Florida under your watch. Which of the reforms do you think was your single most important accomplishment?
When I left office there were 223,000 more Florida students reading successfully and 234,000 more students doing math on grade level or higher than when I became governor. Their progress and increased chances for a successful future are what I am most proud of. Their increased success is due to the entire package of reforms. One single component without the other pieces would not have transformed the system.

Increased standards for students don’t have an impact if we don’t measure the progress toward meeting those standards.

Measuring progress of student learning does not have an impact if the results are not published in a clear, transparent, fair manner that allows the general public to see the progress and the areas that need improvement.

Reporting on the results is not the ultimate solution unless there is real accountability tied to those results.

Accountability must be implemented with both rewards and incentives for success, and consequences and assistance for failure.

I have said before that success is never final and reform is never finished. Throughout my eight years in office, we took steps forward; gradually increasing our standards for what constitutes an “A” school, increasing the writing requirements when it became apparent that our students and teachers were ready for the higher bar, and expanding choice options for those who needed another environment in order to succeed.

If we had stopped at the law that was passed in 1999, we would not have seen the continued, incremental progress in

**Quick Off the Blocks, Slow to Finish** (Figure 1)

*Florida’s 4th graders have made large test-score gains, both on Florida’s own tests and as compared to students nationwide; but the gains of older students have been smaller and uneven.*
student learning because the system would have normed to the new status quo.

**EN:** Can you give an example, a particular school or school district, perhaps, where one or more of these reforms helped raise school performance?

**JB:** Alexander Elementary School in Tampa is a school that exemplifies the success of education reform. The school is 90 percent minority and 85 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch. The primary language for half the students is a language other than English. The accountability system in Florida did not give them a pass or set lower standards for the school and its students simply because they came from challenging backgrounds. Instead, we set high standards for student achievement and provided incentives for the school to improve. The school has steadily increased from a “D” in 1999 to an “A” in 2006.

The principal, Dr. Manuel Duran, can testify to the changes he has seen because of accountability. He made language arts and reading a focus in the school. He recruits the best and brightest teachers and even brought some highly effective teachers out of retirement. He placed the best teachers in reading positions to ensure struggling students get the attention and focus they need to gain proficiency in reading.

Dr. Duran hosts a pancake breakfast each month for students who have perfect attendance and rewards students for their academic achievement with awards that look like the Oscar. The results speak for themselves: 72 percent of his students are reading at or above grade level, up from 36 percent in 1999, and 69 percent of his students are doing math at or above grade level, up from 26 percent in 1999.

**EN:** How important were your school choice reforms? How serious a defeat was the finding that the Opportunity Scholarship Program was unconstitutional?

**JB:** School choice is a key component of education reform. Empowering parents to choose the school that best meets the needs of their child forces the system to improve. It causes the system to focus on the child.

The Opportunity Scholarship Program was the first statewide voucher program created in the nation. Students in failing schools were given a choice of attending a higher-performing public school or an eligible private school. Independent research by the Manhattan Institute, Cornell University, and others shows that the Opportunity Scholarship Program and the threat of real school choice has created greater student performance in the public school system.

However, the opponents of school choice could not stand by and allow 753 students to attend a private school. They challenged the program, and we fought all the way to the Florida Supreme Court. Unfortunately, in January of 2006, the Florida Supreme Court ruled the program unconstitutional primarily on the grounds that it created competition with the public school system and because the private schools were not “uniform” with our public schools, which is the whole point of school choice. The decision could have severe impacts on other programs in Florida that create competition with our public schools with “nonuniform” alternatives:

- Charter schools—355 charter schools with 99,000 students
- McKay Scholarship Program—vouchers for 17,000 students with disabilities
- Corporate Tax Scholarship Program—scholarships for 14,500 low-income students
- Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program—85 percent of pre-K providers are private providers
- Virtual Schools—more than 14,000 students.

The only way to reverse this detrimental decision is by a constitutional amendment to clarify that school choice is allowed and supported by Florida citizens. It is my hope that the Florida legislature and Governor Crist will pursue constitutional protection for school choice.

**EN:** During your watch, NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) test scores for students in 4th grade climbed steeply. But the performance of older students did not show the same improvement (see Figure 1). Why do you think that happened? What do you recommend as the appropriate solution?
**JB**: Florida did experience incredible progress in reading, writing, and math of our 4th-grade students. In six short years, we moved from the bottom nationally to above the national average. In my last year in office, we began to see the progress inch into the middle-school years.

In 2006 our middle-school students showed the greatest achievement ever—a single-year six-point increase in the percentage of students reading at grade level or higher on our state assessment.

Reforms must be given time to work. It will be another four years before we have the first graduating class of students who entered school under real accountability and high expectations. However, we are beginning to see the growing bubble of better-prepared students moving through the system.

**EN**: Don Hirsch has argued that many elementary-school students are only learning skills that are tested at that grade level. They are not getting the substantive knowledge they need to be successful later on. Do you agree?

**JB**: As better-prepared students move through the system, teachers will be able to spend time teaching more substantive knowledge instead of having to remediate. But we shouldn’t rely on this alone for future success. We have to continually raise the bar on our standards, on our assessment, and on how we grade schools.

In my last year in office, we initiated the next steps of middle-school reform by requiring students to complete three credits each in language arts, math, science, and social studies before they move to high school. We brought relevance to the high-school experience by requiring students to select majors. This is not “tracking,” but rather a way for students to begin to focus on their interests, talents, and abilities. The new Florida high school diploma mirrors the college model: 16 credits in core academic areas, 4 credits in a major area of interest, and 4 elective credits. The area of interest could range from biotechnology to aviation to culinary arts to entrepreneurship. There are over 440 majors from which students can choose. And in doing so, they will begin to apply their academic skills in practical and relevant ways.

**EN**: According to external assessments, Florida state standards are not as strong as those in other states. Why did you give lower priority to this issue?

**JB**: When I took office in 1999, Florida’s Sunshine State Standards were still fairly new, having been adopted in 1996. So, we focused our efforts on measuring student performance to those new standards. It is clearly time for the standards to be reevaluated. We began a rotating review of all subjects. Earlier this spring, our state board of education adopted updated standards in reading and language of time because we are seeing tremendous results and there is great consensus that reading skills above all others are critical for a child’s future success. Governor Crist has advocated an expansion of reading reform by placing a reading coach in every school. With this commitment, Florida will lead the nation in the number of reading coaches.

The greatest temptation for change in reform is a gradual watering down of the policies. For example, including subjective criteria into the grading of schools or setting different expectations for certain groups of students or schools would be a travesty that would create a drag leading toward lower expectations and excuses.

**EN**: Many governors have found some of their boldest education reforms undone or dissipated after they left office. Which of your reforms are most likely to endure? Which policies will still be in place 10 years from now?
EN: What advice would you give to other governors who want to reform K–12 education?
JB: When you run, say what you are going to do and be bold. In addition, stay strong. Creating a system of high-quality education should be the number-one priority of all governors. Education impacts successes in all other policy areas.

No Child Left Behind
EN: What two or three elements of NCLB were most problematic from Florida’s standpoint?
JB: For states like Florida that already had a strong accountability plan in place, the federal law should have been more flexible. For example, if Florida, Texas, and Tennessee can measure the progress of individual students over time, our state plans should be allowed to factor in student progress in addition to proficiency.

Additionally, the federal law should have had safeguards in place so that states that were at the beginning stages of implementing accountability systems would not have an incentive to set a low bar on performance to create an illusion of progress.

EN: What are the most important things to change when NCLB is reauthorized? Why?
JB: The two items that most need to be changed in the law are the hard-line date of 2014 and the designation of schools as AYP or non-AYP. It is wonderful to set an aspirational goal of 2014 for all students in all subgroups in all grades in the United States to be reading and doing math on grade level. However, it should be just that—an aspirational goal. To set a date for absolute proficiency does not recognize the various stages of performance among states, schools, and students. It would be better to set annual goals for each and every student in the state.

There should be more options for rating schools than just making AYP and not making AYP. A school that prepares 90 percent of its students and a school that only prepares 10 percent should not be painted with the same label.

EN: How much progress is enough? Would a reasonable goal be to get all students to proficiency by the time they graduate from high school?
JB: The minimum progress we should accept is a year’s worth of knowledge gained in a year’s time. However, with students who are already behind, more than a year’s learning gains will be necessary to get them to proficiency by the time they graduate from high school. Schools and teachers should have incentives to achieve this level of progress.

If we could create an accountability system that ensures students are proficient by the time they graduate from high school that would be a great success.

EN: How about NCLB’s school choice provisions? How should they be improved?
JB: Nationally, the fact that so few parents are taking advantage of NCLB’s tutoring options seems indicative of poor implementation. The main reason the tutoring options are not utilized seems to be that parents did not know they had the option and/or they didn’t know in time to exercise the option. States should be empowered to enforce implementation. School districts should not be allowed to hide the tutoring option from parents in order to “save” their Title I funds for the future.

In Florida, we embraced the Supplemental Educational Services (SES) provision of NCLB by communicating it as a three-way partnership where the parents, the private tutoring provider, and the school are all working together for the benefit of the student. Our efforts are beginning to pay off. Last year only 17 percent of eligible students nationally received these services, while in Florida we served double that number: 34 percent. But even that percentage was far too low. So in the 2006 legislative session, we passed some accountability legislation that more clearly articulated the responsibilities of both school districts and providers, as well as consequences for not putting forth a good-faith effort in implementation.

EN: How about NCLB’s teacher quality provisions? Should they be revised? How should teacher quality be determined?
JB: I have always been a proponent of outcomes vs. inputs. The most objective way to determine the quality of the teacher in the classroom is to look at the data: Did the students in a teacher’s class make progress? Did they improve and gain a year’s worth of knowledge during the school year?

Instead of having a single national standard, it would be better for NCLB to have incentives for all states to continue to raise the bar on their own standards.

No Child Left Behind should be providing incentives to states to implement merit-based performance pay systems that identify and reward high-performing teachers, regardless of years of experience, degree, or other inputs.

EN: Should we move toward national standards, or is that an issue best left to the states?

JB: I believe it is in our national interest to have high standards, and I also believe in the role of sovereign states in our federalist system. Instead of having a single national standard, it would be better for NCLB to have incentives for all states to continue to raise the bar on their own standards. For example, incentive funding could be provided to states that closely align their proficiency standards with NAEP.

EN: Currently, Florida’s proficiency standards fall well below NAEP standards. Do you think Florida should close the gap?

JB: Florida’s standards should be raised and then our assessment instrument, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), should be brought in line with the new standards. House Speaker Marco Rubio has established, as one of his top priorities, the creation of world-class standards in Florida so our students can compete with the best students in the world. This is a worthy and necessary next step for excellence in Florida.

Tactics and Politics

EN: Is it important to “sequence” education reforms in a particular way? For instance, does an accountability plan need to come before school choice? Does merit pay have to come after other policies take root?

JB: There may not be a magic order in which reforms have to be implemented, but there are some logical steps that should be taken. For example, if you want teacher pay to be based on merit, you have to have a fair, transparent system in place to measure the student performance on which the pay will be based. Now that we are raising the standards, this will drive changes in the test that measures to the standards, which will impact the grading metric for meeting the standards, and ultimately will impact the types and scope of rewards and assistance. It is a model for continuous improvement that will create a world-class system of education for our students.

EN: Very few school districts in the country have been able to introduce merit pay. In Florida, merit pay reforms are currently being challenged in the legislature. Is this reform too controversial to pursue? Are there ways of achieving genuine reform without it?
**JB:** True performance pay is a critical reform for long-term success. Florida is in the early stages of one of the most comprehensive merit-pay plans in the nation. A key ingredient of a true merit-pay plan is an objective assessment of a teacher’s impact on student learning. Without that, the system will move toward the status quo of lockstep pay scales.

Ten years ago, supporters of the status quo railed against standards and accountability, but now those reforms are generally accepted. As states such as Florida and Texas move forward on merit pay, I believe it will be as commonplace as standards and accountability are today.

**EN:** What surprised you about the politics of education reform? Would you change any of your political tactics?

**JB:** In the world of politics, there is typically a need for instant gratification and immediate results. With education reform, the results are incremental, so tremendous political capital and patience must be constantly exerted to stay on the path to reform. However, it is the cumulative effect of the incremental improvement that creates significant progress.

If I could have changed anything, it would have been to better communicate to parents, teachers, and principals both the need for reform and the incremental nature of the progress that can be made.

**EN:** Can you provide a specific example or two of when you might have done better at communicating?

**JB:** Sharing the actual FCAT test questions with the public and with teachers, as we began to do in 2005 once we had enough test items, should have been done much earlier in my administration. On a large scale, sharing with parents and teachers how the FCAT is developed and how schools are graded is critical. This spring, the Florida Department of Education released a wonderful DVD that provides parents with much-needed information on how the accountability system affects their child.

**EN:** Some people say that Floridians are tiring of school reform. Did you try to do too much?

**JB:** I wish we could have done more. It is the responsibility of elected officials to continuously pursue and support a world-class education system.

I don’t believe there is necessarily weariness of school reform as much as there is a natural human tendency to resist change. Reform is change. It is difficult, but it is worthwhile.