“By...[selecting] the youths of genius from among the classes of the poor, we hope to avail the State of those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich, but which perish without use if not sought for and cultivated.”

—Thomas Jefferson, 1782

“We need to challenge the soft bigotry of low expectations. We must not tolerate a system that gives up on people.”

—George W. Bush, 2006

Two presidents speaking 224 years apart declared the importance of challenging every American child to achieve the potential that lies within each of them. Education and the responsibility of our government to provide it have been part of the political debate since our nation’s earliest days. At our founding, Jefferson argued that an educated citizenry would serve as the ultimate guardian against the threat of an oppressive government.

The Right Republican Strategy

BY DAVID WINSTON

Stronger accountability in service of world-class standards
That remains true today. But the twenty-first-century global marketplace demands more of our education system. When President George W. Bush called upon our schools to “leave no child behind,” he did so because he understands, like most people in this country, that a well-educated America is also an economically competitive America. In his sobering book, *The World Is Flat*, Thomas Friedman warns against assuming that “because America’s economy has dominated the world for more than a century, it will and must always be” in the forefront. In fact, he calls the notion that America will forever be the economic powerhouse it is today a “dangerous illusion.”

In today’s Information Age, the ability to process knowledge and out-innovate the competition separates economic winners from losers. Education is the new capital and gives us that competitive edge. But by most measurements today, our schools, at best, get mediocre grades. In 2005, Achieve, Inc., a nonprofit, nonpartisan group concerned with preparing young people for work and college, released “Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?” College professors polled said that approximately half of all incoming students at their schools were not prepared to handle college-level math and writing. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce recently gave this critical assessment of our education system: “Education spending has steadily increased and rafts of well-intentioned school reforms have come and gone. But student achievement has remained stagnant, and our K–12 schools have stayed remarkably unchanged—preserving, as if in amber, the routines, culture, and operations of an obsolete 1930s manufacturing plant.”

More and more Americans agree. A joint survey done by Peter Hart Research Associates and The Winston Group last year for the Educational Testing Service (ETS) found that Americans are worried our education system will be unable to meet the needs of the future and sustain the quality of life we enjoy today. People instinctively sense that our schools are not adequately preparing our children for the competitive world of the twenty-first century.

The Politics of Education
It is important, when looking at education through a political lens, to understand that it is far more than an issue. Education has morphed into something personal. For most Americans, it has become a basic value that defines, in part, who we are. For the poor it is the path out of poverty, for immigrants the chance to find freedom and opportunity. Education gives the middle class a shot at the brass ring, and for every parent, it fuels the hope that their children’s lives will be better than their own.

Because education has become such an intrinsic part of American life it may well have a decisive impact on the outcome of the 2008 presidential race, just as it did in 2000, the closest presidential election in recent history. That year, voters said in exit polls that education was the second most important factor in making their presidential choice, just slightly trailing the economy and jobs. This was a significant shift from 1996, when education tied for third place with the issue of the deficit, coming behind the economy and jobs and Medicare and Social Security. Among voters who said education was their top issue in 1996, Clinton beat Dole by a remarkable 62 points, 78 vs. 16 percent.

In 2000, however, George W. Bush and congressional Republicans structurally changed the education debate, as decades of Democratic education policies ran up against reality. Voters recognized that the education status quo was failing too many children. Bush and congressional Republicans called for an end to the “soft bigotry of low expectations” and a focus on achievement outcomes. Together, they pushed an education reform agenda, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), that emphasized higher standards and more accountability, a results-based approach that parents liked.

A majority of voters who cited education as their number-one concern in 2000 still pulled the lever for Democrat Al Gore. But in making education a focus of his campaign, Bush kept Gore’s advantage on this important issue to only eight points, 52 vs. 44 percent. A number of issues and factors affected the outcome of that election, but the very closeness of the race made swing voters, for whom education is a top priority,
particularly crucial. While Bush didn’t win the “education vote,” he closed the margin dramatically on this traditionally Democratic issue, especially with swing voters.

Since 9/11, education has taken a political back seat to national security and the economy. In 2004, education came in seventh on the list of voters’ top issues in exit polls. In the 2006 congressional elections, exit polls didn’t address the question of education at all. Still, private surveys showed that education was an important issue for many swing voter groups then and has remained remarkably steady over the past seven years. In a New Models survey conducted by the Winston Group in May 2007, married women with children, a key swing voter group, ranked education second in importance, only a single point behind defense and terrorism. In 2008, the same swing voter groups that played such a decisive role eight years before could again provide the margin of victory for the winning presidential candidate.

A Republican Education Agenda
Republicans have a significant opportunity in next year’s election to win on the education issue by continuing their push for a reform-based education agenda and arguing against the idea that more money without real structural reform can fix the ills of our education system. For decades, Democrats have embraced the status quo, calling for increased federal spending as the solution to declining test scores and increasing numbers of students ill prepared for the future. Between 1980 and 2000, Department of Education (DOE) spending rose by a staggering 174 percent, from $14 billion to $38.4 billion, with little to show for it. The Democrats got what they wished for, but the bleak record of education achievement in the 1980s and 1990s shows their funding-based approach simply doesn’t work. The central premise of the Democratic Party’s education policy—that a lack of money is the problem with America’s schools—has been debunked by years of negative student outcomes.

All of which explains why George W. Bush was able in the 2000 election to connect with voters on the education issue. When he spoke of “leaving no child behind,” it resonated with parents who wanted a new approach to the challenges facing their children’s schools. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act emphasized accountability, higher standards, parental involvement, and increased resources to help students and schools most in need. It took effect in January 2002 and put American education on a new course.

Stick With No Child Left Behind
Republicans can make a persuasive case that they have been the agents of real change in our schools. They should stick with the principles of the No Child Left Behind Act. The NCLB reauthorization debate will give Republicans an
opportunity to contrast their approach of accountability, parental involvement, and targeted spending with the Democrats' traditional "show us the money" education policy.

Although in effect for a relatively short period of time, the programs mandated by NCLB are beginning to show results. The 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Nation’s Report Card, showed that nine-year-olds made “more progress in reading over the past five years than in the previous 28 years combined…and posted the best scores in math in the history of the report.” The same tests showed that 13-year-olds had the “highest math scores ever recorded,” which included all-time high scores for African American and Hispanic students. Other scores showed improvement in urban districts and in narrowing the gap between whites and minority children.

The vast majority of Americans, 76 percent, support reauthorization of NCLB, according to the ETS survey; parents of school-age children (K–12) favor reauthorization at an even higher rate. Even school teachers and administrators, some of the act’s biggest critics, favor reauthorization by 75 percent and 78 percent, respectively, although with modifications.

Yet it would be a mistake for Republicans to rest on NCLB’s early gains. If all students are going to be achieving at grade level or better in reading and mathematics by 2014, progress must come faster. That will take some changes to the provisions. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings recognizes that fact. Talking about the NCLB reauthorization, she said, “we can use the knowledge we’ve gained to strengthen and improve the law...continuing the workable, common sense approach that we’ve developed together with states.”

Demand Tougher Standards and Higher Expectations

Republicans should also argue that dramatically improving our schools may require a tougher attitude toward failure on the part of parents, teachers, and taxpayers. With countries like China and India focusing their education systems on preparing workers to compete against our children, the excuses that have kept our schools mediocre for years are no longer acceptable. Moving from 6 percent of Washington, D.C., 4th graders scoring proficient or advanced on the 2000 NAEP math test to 11 percent in 2005 is progress. But real achievement means no child scores below proficient. With America’s economic future riding on our schools’ ability to produce a competitive twenty-first-century workforce, “failure isn’t an option.”

That means setting world-class standards. But today we have a mishmash of state standards that often leave parents unable to assess the quality of their children’s schools. What one state deems a high standard may appear low in another. If a standard is deficient and state tests are geared to it, schools will not see real achievement. Only when external tests such as NAEP expose failing students and schools will parents realize their state standards simply don't make the grade. But by then it may be too late for their children.

Implementing tougher standards has always been a Republican idea and will be again in 2008. At the heart of Republican education policy is a core belief: if we ask more of American students, they will produce more. The Republican agenda calls for higher expectations for students themselves. School systems must look critically at what is working and what is not working in their schools. That means putting money into initiatives that will bring achievement for all students: historically low performers, who must be able to compete in a world that demands higher skills; average students, who need to care more about their studies if they are going to succeed; and top students, who will drive the country’s future innovations.

School choice, school vouchers, merit pay, teacher standards, and a raft of other education reforms are key elements of the Republican education agenda and in 2008 will once again offer voters innovative ideas to address our education challenges.

Reject the Traditional Funding Debate

Democrats reject most of these reforms out of hand, fearing the loss of political support from education special interests. Instead, as they have done in election after election, they will likely embrace an attack strategy decrying Republicans’ “failure” to fund education.

The facts tell a different story. At the end of his second term, Bill Clinton signed a $42 billion DOE budget. All told, Clinton increased education spending by 6 percent ($2.7 billion
using constant 2007 dollars) over his Republican predecessor, which earned him the praise and political support of the education establishment.

Under President George W. Bush, the 2007 DOE budget hit $67.4 billion. Bush increased education funding over Clinton by 38 percent (nearly $19 billion), yet Democrats tell the American people that education is underfunded (see Figure 1). This election, Republicans should dispel the Democratic myth because the education debate ought to focus on what’s really important—the need for dramatic education reform based on student outcomes.

A Tough Question for ’08
All of which brings us back to the core education question of the 2008 campaign, a question that deserves an answer from the men and women, Republican and Democratic, who aspire to lead this country:

As political leaders, how will you transform our schools from a model that tolerates failure and gauges success by the size of the school budget to an Information Age model that measures success by student achievement and ensures that every child can succeed in the global economy?

The full impact of an ineffective system of public education may not be evident for many years. But one day America will pay a heavy price for accepting and excusing mediocrity in our schools; generations of American children unprepared for the modern workplace.

In 2000, “education” voters said, “Stop processing students, stop looking at them as profit centers, and start preparing them for a tough, competitive world out there.” Republicans listened, promised change, and put the country on a path of education reform. The 2008 election will determine whether the country continues down that path and is ready to compete in the future.

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