



Building a 21st Century U.S. Education System

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Making Politics Work to Dramatically Improve American Education

Jim Hunt

I share with others writing for this book the conviction that we must make a quantum leap in the quality of American education. It is a moral issue as David Hornbeck contends and it is essential if America is to maintain its high standard of living economically. In fact, with the retirement of the post World War II baby boom generation, we are now threatened with a reduction in American competitiveness as workers well prepared under the G.I. Bill are replaced by poor and minority workers with less educational skills.

We in America can compete with China which has four times our population, works longer and harder hours than we do, has ingenuity in their DNA (they invented gun powder thousands of years ago), but we can only do it by being the best in the world in education and seeing that every person gets it. We no longer have a margin of error for excessive local control of schools or weak state standards and accountability. We must “gear up” for the global economic competition as our nation did for World War II when we committed ourselves unreservedly to win, mobilized our people and our resources, and made whatever sacrifices were required for success. This time the future of our nation requires not the bloodshed of young Americans, but their superb, successful education. And we as citizens must do everything necessary to provide it.

Bob Wehling and other writers in this book describe the changes in our nation’s public education system that must occur in order for us to succeed. I want to deal with how the changes must come about in our democratic system of government where political leaders must understand the critical nature of education in our society, the steps required to reform it, and have the courage and skill to lead the change.

For sixteen years (1977-1985, 1993-2001), I served as Governor of North Carolina, the tenth largest state in America. It is a state with the nation’s second largest banking center in Charlotte and the vibrant Research Triangle connecting Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill. But it also has a large population of poor people – white, Hispanic and African American. Public education has been the key to its progress. But while student test scores have gone up dramatically in recent years, nearly one-third of our students who start the ninth grade drop out of school. We must strive to graduate 100 percent of our students with the knowledge and skills to go to college or hold good jobs.

States have the primary responsibility for education – in fact, it’s required in most state constitutions. And while I have come to believe that a national government role is increasingly required, the states and local governments must have political leadership that makes education their number one priority and provides the policies and resources required to succeed.

What do we need in political leadership to make dramatic change in public education – to build and call forth a public will for excellence and quality that will make it happen all across America?

First, we need “education candidates” to run for office. I ran my first race for Lt. Governor because my life experiences and my teacher mother caused me to know that education was the most important thing. Whether candidates come at it from a social, moral or an economic point of view, citizens should carefully analyze a candidate’s reason for running. Those who are good education candidates will usually talk with knowledge about the schools and convey a passion about children and learning. We as citizens should recruit candidates like this, offer to help them, and give generously to their campaigns.

Second, candidates who run for office should learn the issues involved in improving schools and helping all students succeed. It’s not enough to just be for education or even to pledge to spend more money on schools. Candidates should know exactly what the issues are and make explicit commitments to change things. I ran my first campaign as Governor on a pledge to improve reading in my state’s schools. I’d been in lots of classrooms and had teachers tell me they had three or four “nonreaders” in their classes. My first campaign commercial had me talking with a group of parents and exclaiming that it made me angry to find out that we had nonreaders in the third grade. As Governor, I put a full-time “reading assistant” in every first through third grade classroom in my state. Reading scores shot up with two adults in each class.

In later campaigns, I promised to raise education standards with rigorous tests, improve teacher quality, and raise their pay. The key here is to know what is needed most to improve education, make specific proposals for improvement, and use the entire campaign as a time to educate the public about the schools’ needs and build public support for your proposals. When you win, it’s not just your promises in a campaign that you take forward but a mandate from the voters. In my last campaign for governor in 1996, I promised to raise standards for teaching and to raise pay from 43rd in the nation to the national average. We went from 43rd to 20th (then the national average) in just four years. I had told the voters my plans, told them exactly what it would cost, and the people voted for my proposal and to spend the money when they elected me.

Third, political leaders must use their “bully pulpit” constantly – ad nauseam. In my third campaign for governor, I proposed an early childhood education program that came to be called Smart Start. The Republican business leader who chaired my 501 (c)(3) foundation that ran Smart Start declares to this day that he never heard me make a speech – on any topic – when I didn’t work Smart Start into my text. The press corps poked fun at me in their “end of the Legislature skit” because I was constantly telling about the importance of a young child’s brain development when the little neurons connect up: “snap, crackle and pop.” The point is a Governor must always be educating, advocating, urging the Legislature, educators and the public to move forward, take action, help every child learn.

Fourth, effective political leaders for education must develop specific plans for improvement. They can’t take a plan off the shelf. It can’t be something they “parrot” from an advisor or expert. It must come from their own study, reading, learning from teachers and parents. I learned a lot from being a school volunteer every week that I was governor for sixteen years. I learned from students and teachers and I especially learned what the school atmosphere was like. I learned from helping to found the National Board for

Professional Teaching Standards and chairing it for ten years. I literally sat at the feet of America's great teachers and listened to them discuss what accomplished teachers need to know and be able to do – and how to measure it.

Education Governors and Presidents (who were often first Education Governors) should personally lead the development of bold education improvement plans. They can and must bring together the big actors who can design it for success, who can help pass it in the Legislature, and who can ease the path for enacting the program after it is passed and funded. I always brought these people around the table with me presiding in the library of the Governor's Mansion. Teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members – they were all there. Often it required many sessions. And almost always there was give and take required for buy in. For example, the teachers' organizations were always leery of new requirements of their members and anything that sounded like pay for performance. But when they were fully involved, as they were when we developed a twelve percent bonus pay for Nationally Board Certified Teachers and a \$1500 per year bonus for each teacher in a school where test scores were high, they gave strong support for passage and made it work in the school buildings.

Political leaders who really want to improve education should always be a friend of teachers. And, they should listen to teachers. You don't always have to agree with the position of their organizations. But, you should always appreciate them, respect them, praise them for doing the most important work in our nation, and find ways to encourage and support their excellence. And, always continue to learn about how to improve teaching.

Fifth, to make the big changes we must make in education in America, we must have bipartisan support. You can't get everybody and you can't let the extremes in either party whipsaw you. But, public schools are so much the people's business in America that a good bit of bi-partisan support can usually be developed if you're smart and really work at it. I remember our efforts to raise teaching standards and raise pay to the national average. We did it with eight percent pay raises each year for four years in a row. I committed to do it in my last campaign for Governor and we had a big win. Every poll showed the people were for it. But, it was going to cost \$1.25 billion.

With the campaign over, I continued my advocacy for my top issue every day. It was the centerpiece of my Inaugural Address and my State of the State speech. I talked to the Democratic Senate President Pro Tempore in my party (a good friend) and urged him to sign the bill at the top – he had followed a practice of not signing bills before. He agreed and his Senators couldn't wait to add their names. The Speaker of the House of Representatives was Republican but I knew that he was an education supporter. I also knew that the brother of my State Campaign Finance Chairman was a Republican close to the Speaker. He helped me get to the Speaker and he signed on. He and I together got the House members.

Then to top it off, we brought in the people who are the really big guns in every state – the business community. I was known as a “pro education, pro jobs, pro business” governor and the top state business leaders were my friends and big supporters of improved education.

The Joint Senate-House Appropriations Committee had a hearing on my bill entitled “The Excellent Schools Act.” We had fifteen CEOs of the top business and industry leaders come in and testify for the bill. When they finished the game was over. It passed both houses by overwhelming margins. As a newly re-elected Governor, I had a big win as did the Democratic Legislators. But so did the Republicans. They established their education credentials in a way that helped them in elections for years to come.

The lesson: be bi-partisan and get business to help you!

Sixth, when a Governor has education legislation to pass and the opposition is fierce, go to the districts of your opponents. Go to the schools. Have a town meeting with students, teachers, parents and others in the school library after school. Invite the local Legislators to come even if they oppose you. Praise the local schools’ accomplishments (there are always special things to praise) and then talk about the problems and how your bill and the funding for it will help them. Try to get prominent business support. Get the newspapers, TV, radio and bloggers to cover you and give them interviews. Remember, the old baseball adage if the questions are hostile: “the harder they throw it, the farther you can hit it.”

You may not get the local legislators’ support but at least you’ll soften him or her up. The parents, school people, business leaders and others may do the rest.

Seventh, to really make change happen in the schools and in the lives of students, legislative and appropriations accomplishments must be followed up by successful implementation. A Governor may have appointed the State Board of Education, and, perhaps, the State Superintendent, but he must stay informed on how the implementation is going and push when people tend to weaken in the face of opposition. As Governor, I had to regularly keep a stiff backbone with certain members of my State Board of Education regarding education standards. And, one of my few defeats as Governor came when certain school district superintendents complained that our plan to require teachers who were getting huge pay increases to prove their effectiveness in the classroom by doing portfolios of their work before receiving full licensure was too time consuming. They went around me to the Legislature and got the portfolio requirement taken out of the law. I was not vigilant enough in making sure that the portfolio proof of the teachers’ effectiveness was retained as a requisite for the big salary increases we’d provided.

Eighth, in order to galvanize the people to do big things in improving education, political leaders must constantly tell the people how they’re doing – and challenge them to do better. Not just the educators but all of the people of the State. When North Carolina set new standards for our schools in the 1990s and started measuring students and schools by school results, we reported publicly every year how the schools were doing. If they were doing well, we praised them. In one year, 94 percent of our schools averaged a full year’s progress and the teachers got bonuses. If we (not the schools but we) slipped back, we used it as motivation to try harder, use some new approaches, put more resources into high needs school.

The test results and other data weren’t just put out by the State Superintendent and School Board, I was there as Governor to get it the maximum attention. We focused in

particular on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results. These compared us with other states and we used these results to stoke the competitive fires of people to not only excel in our region but move toward the top nationally. During the 1990s, North Carolina schools improved NAEP test scores more than any other state and I'm convinced that it was, in part, because all of our people focused on them – educators, parents, politicians, and business leaders.

Ninth, in order to attain a high quality, world-class education for all students, political leaders must see that fundamental reforms that work are institutionalized. Every new governor who comes in wants to put in place his or her “own program”. But, the fact is that high and rigorous academic standards that are assessed regularly and accurately must stay in place year after year. (Of course, we must raise standards on occasion, as the world becomes more competitive, but we must maintain our basis for comparison.) But, education standards must stay solidly in place and testing programs be clearly mandated by law or strong education policy. When changes are needed, the process needs to be transparent and the public given full information about what's happening with their education standards.

Some educational efforts may be best done through nonprofit corporations such as Smart Start in North Carolina. This approach has the advantage of not being a “government program” per se and because each county has its own 501(c)(3) with its own Board of Directors, it is less likely to be tampered with by a change of political winds. But, by whatever means, good political leaders who want lasting change need to think about how to make this last?

Tenth and last, the attainment of an excellent education for every student in America requires us as a people to explicitly set that out as a big, bold national goal—just as we did under John F. Kennedy to put a man on the moon in a decade.

I tried to do this as governor at the end of my fourth term by pointing out to North Carolinians that we were first in America in education progress during the 1990s and that we should have the goal of being “First in America,” period, by 2010. In fact, my last State of the State message was solely about education.

We've made attempts at this big goal setting twice with education as a nation already. Dick Riley, who did a great job as Secretary of Education under President Clinton, points out in subsequent pages how the nation's governors in 1989 met with President George H. W. Bush and agreed to set national goals for education.

These goals were really challenging – the kind of big, bold goals that America should have:

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
3. American students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be pre-

pared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our Nation's modern economy.

4. The Nation's teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.
5. U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.
6. Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
7. Every school in America will be free of drugs, violence and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.
8. Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.

As Chairman of the National Education Goals Panel in the 1990s, I became very familiar with the progress we were making as states and as a nation toward meeting these goals. We weren't doing very well but at least we were trying—aiming toward worthy goals. It was especially disappointing that Congressional opposition killed the goals a few years later but by then most states were moving toward setting their own standards and goals.

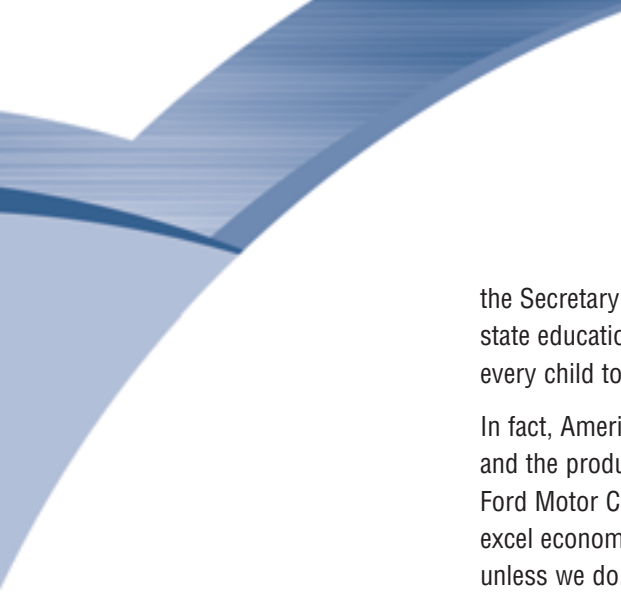
When President George W. Bush proposed the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and got it passed with the help of Senator Ted Kennedy, Representative George Miller, and bipartisan Congressional support, it contained another big American educational goal: "To have every American student at grade level or above in twelve years." And, states were required to measure student achievement each year to see how they were doing toward meeting the goal.

This was hugely ambitious, and perhaps a little too optimistic. But, it was, and still is, the right kind of goal for America to have. And, we have learned a lot in pursuing it that will make us as a nation more successful in our future efforts.

As the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind is considered and we approach the 2008 presidential campaign and a new administration in 2009, we have a wonderful chance to set new and challenging, yet realistic, goals for American education. They should be bold and audacious for the nation and reflect our ambition for every child to burgeon out all that is within him or her.

And, while the learning of individual students and the performance of schools, districts and states should be rigorously measured and reported each year, we should also measure "progress." Schools that make a year's progress, or more, in a given year should be held up and applauded – even if the students started way behind.

And, states should be more involved in the goal setting and reporting of educational progress each year. Governors and Legislators need to be using their bully pulpits to focus on how the schools are doing. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings has worked well with governors and really "pushed," but the President of the United States,



the Secretary of Education and other federal officials should meet with governors and state education officials more often to plan joint efforts to improve the schools and help every child to a world-class level.

In fact, America needs Presidents in the years ahead who make improving the education and the productivity of America's people and economy their number one priority – or as Ford Motor Company says, “Job One.” We will not have the intelligence and resources to excel economically or to track our enemies and fight conflicts that may be thrust upon us unless we do.

So, I hope that the next President will make the dramatic improvement of education in our nation the main subject of an Inaugural Address and the State of the Union speech. And, then, personally lead discussions with the Congress and the states to make American education the best in the world based on strong American standards and with the goal of making our people the most creative, innovative, productive and caring people to be found anywhere on earth.

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