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ASSESSING THE BUSH EDUCATION PROPOSAL

INTRODUCTION

When George Bush released his *America 2000* action plan for improving America's schools this April 18, he triggered a long overdue debate in Washington on education reform and placed parental choice firmly at the center of that debate. Bush rightly stressed that fundamental reform, not more money, is the key to school improvement, declaring: "We spend 33 percent more per pupil in 1991 than we did in 1981 — 33 percent in real constant dollars — and I don't think there's a person anywhere who would say that we've seen a 33 percent improvement in our school's performance." He argued that real change must come from communities, through parental involvement in the schools, and not from Washington or from the education establishment.

The Bush proposals have been turned into a bill known as the *America 2000 Excellence in Education Act*. It is sponsored in the Senate (S. 1141) by Orrin Hatch, the Utah Republican, and Edward Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat; and in the House (H.R. 2460) by Robert Michel of Illinois and William Goodling of Pennsylvania, both Republicans.

Troubling Reports. As originally designed, the White House-sponsored bill merited high marks. Whether it still does is uncertain, as reports rumble through Capitol Hill that the White House, possibly tempted to get an education act at almost any cost, has been making compromises that gut the measure. Cut already from the package, it is being whispered, are the parental choice plan and national testing — central to the President's plan. If true, the Bush education bill will have become captured by the liberals and education establishment. The result will be a revised bill that will be more a package of big spending liberal programs than a bold reform of America's schools.

The original White House proposal strikes four themes:

1) Better and More Accountable Schools

These are to be achieved by giving parents the ability to choose the schools that their children attend, by strengthening national testing of students and by increasing teachers' and administrators' flexibility in designing school programs. States also are to be encouraged to adopt alternative certification for teachers and principals.

The parental choice provisions would enable federal Chapter 1 funds, the program for disadvantaged students, to "follow" eligible students to any chosen school, public or private, and would establish a \$200 million grant program to encourage local initiatives that allow parents to choose schools, public or private, for their children. The plan seeks to increase flexibility for teachers and administrators by eliminating some federal regulations and by streamlining requirements in the use of federal monies. To make it easier for experienced Americans without traditional teaching certificates to become teachers or principals, the legislation would earmark \$25 million in grants to those states that adopt procedures that give such individuals certification for teachings.

This first section of the plan also would revise the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the national test created by Congress in 1969 to assess the performance of 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds in ten subject areas. Current law bans the publication of NAEP state-by-state results — with the exception of mathematics results, which for the first time were published this June for each state. The Bush legislation would allow state figures to be published for the other nine subjects.

2) A New Generation of American Schools

This part of the plan would provide seed money to communities exploring innovative solutions for teaching, management, staffing and other school-based problems. To "break the mold" of today's school system, as Education Secretary Lamar Alexander puts it, approximately \$535 million would be allocated to 535 New American Schools, with one such school in each congressional district and an additional two schools for each state. Governors would nominate schools for this designation, and the Secretary of Education would select the model schools, each of which would receive \$1 million to use however it chooses. Existing public and private schools and new institutions would be eligible for the designation.

3) A Nation of Students

This addresses adult education. The primary focus of this section is adult literacy. Bush would establish a system of regional literacy resource centers, to expand and coordinate the fragmented adult literacy services currently available.

Although not included in the legislation, the Administration also will urge businesses to develop educational standards for their workers and set levels of proficiency workers must meet for each industry. Businesses then will be prodded to help create "skills clinics" in which the skills and shortcomings of workers can be assessed and to steer workers to basic training facilities in their communities to improve their skills.

4) Creating Communities Where Learning Can Happen

The final element of the plan is less precise than the first three. It seeks to raise parental and community involvement in education reform. Communities will be pressed by Bush to adopt the six education goals that he and the nation's 50 governors announced in September 1989, to develop a strategy to achieve them, and to produce local report cards to measure progress. These six goals are: "All American children will start school ready to learn; the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent; American students will leave grades four, eight and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter, including English, geography, history, mathematics and science – and all schools in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in the modern economy; U.S. students will be the first in the world in mathematics and science achievement; 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; and every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning."

Considerable Merit. There is considerable merit in the original Bush *America 2000* proposal. Drawing on the evidence of why schools succeed or fail, the proposal wisely focused on testing, choice, competition and freedom to innovate. It is not enough, however, simply to unveil a worthwhile proposal. Bush and Secretary Alexander must campaign aggressively for these central features of *America 2000*. The fiercest battle will be over education choice. Only when public schools face true competition, including that from private schools, will they improve.

The opposition from those who want money not reform will be fierce, but public opinion is on the side of the White House. Polls in virtually every state show support for choice, ranging between 60 percent and 70 percent. In last September's national Gallup Poll for *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine, for instance, 62 percent of those polled support giving parents the right to choose their children's school. Strongest backing for choice comes from minorities, with 72 percent saying they favor choice.

Currently, fourteen states offer parents choice, ranging from statewide public school choice to local plans that include private schools. In addition, twelve states will consider choice legislation or vote on initiatives this year.

Capitol Compromises. Bush must fight hard for all the central provisions of his reform package. If not, he again will suffer defeat as he did last year with his Excellence in Education Act. Then the White House gave up its chance for victory by making concessions preemptively on key provisions, and the plan was stymied by Congress. There are already troubling signs that White House fascination with getting a Bush education bill enacted is tempting officials to retreat on choice. Two proposals that the Administration is strongly rumored to be pursuing would water down the plank on choice. The first proposal is to substitute for Bush's choice plan a scheme by Kennedy to limit the choice program to public schools and require federal monitoring of parent choices. The second proposal being considered on Capitol Hill is to strip from the bill all choice provisions with the promise that these would be considered in separate and later legislation. The argument is that removing this "controversial" feature of the bill would speed passage of the rest of *America 2000*. But this also would virtually guarantee that Congress would kill any change of choice legislation. This would deprive America's school children of the chance for a better education in better schools.

The popular support for the original *America 2000* plan is strong. By going directly to the American people with the proposal, rather than bargaining away the crucial features of his plan, Bush can achieve real reform of America's schools and at last earn the title "Education President."

WHY AMERICA 2000 IS NEEDED

America 2000 could be a breakthrough for education reform because it does not seek to impose on the country some new model of the ideal school, concocted in Washington. Instead it aims at unleashing the creativity of America's communities by empowering parents to judge for themselves whether a school has succeeded or failed in educating their children. To do this, the plan would stimulate parental choice while sweeping away the red tape that suffocates innovation by the schools themselves.

Today nearly every dollar of federal funds carries bureaucratic strings which limit a state's or local school district's ability to use resources. These federal rules are compounded by state regulations, usually the product of teacher union lobbying, which restrict a school's ability to combine state and federal funds creatively, or to make fundamental changes in the way a school operates. The bureaucracies administering these rules, moreover, in many cases syphon off most of the funds intended for schooling. A study of the New York City public schools, for instance, has found that only 32 cents of every dollar actually reaches the classroom.¹

¹ Bruce S. Cooper and Robert Sarrel, *Managing for School Efficiency and Effectiveness: It Can Even Be Done in New York City*, University of Chicago Department of Education, August 1990, p. 6.

Effective Schools. Extensive research over the past two decades finds that schools that are the most effective at raising student achievement are those that enjoy a great deal of autonomy and are least burdened by interference from central office bureaucracies. Effective schools typically are led by principals who have a clear vision of what the school is trying to accomplish and have clear control over personnel decisions. In such schools, teachers are treated as professionals and take part in making school decisions. The schools also have ambitious academic programs. Ineffective schools, by contrast, typically are run by principals who value moving up the management career ladder over what is going on in the classroom. Such principals tend to have few clear goals or are burdened by regulations that limit their power to make decisions regarding such things as curriculum and personnel. The schools also place less emphasis on academic achievement.²

According to Brookings Institution Senior Fellow John E. Chubb and Stanford Political Scientist Terry M. Moe, competitive markets are more likely to produce effective schools than are regulated monopolies. Their widely-acclaimed ten-year study of 500 schools and 20,000 principals, students and teachers finds that private schools, which operate in a competitive market, are more likely to have an effective organization than are public schools, which often are constrained by politics and bureaucracy. Their study also finds that students in effective schools can expect to gain up to one year of additional academic achievement during a typical four-year high school experience when compared with students in ineffective schools.³

BUSH'S FOUR-PLANK PLAN

PLANK #1: Creating Better and More Accountable Schools

In light of the scholarly work of school effectiveness, the most promising and important initiative in the entire Bush plan is the proposal to create more accountable schools. This gets to the heart of what is needed to reform American education: a school system that must satisfy the "consumer." To do this, the plan relies on the five key strategies of parental choice, national testing, flexibility, alternative certification and teacher professionalism.

Parental Choice. Educational choice is the catalyst for all school reforms, because it is the ultimate test of a school. The Administration encourages choice by changing some rules of the Chapter 1 program. The Chapter 1 program was established under the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act to give extra education services to low-income children to compensate for early home and school deficiencies. Now when a child

2 Jeanne Allen, "Politics, Markets and America's Schools: A Summary," Heritage Foundation *Talking Points*, November 21, 1990, pp. 1-2.

3 John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990), p. 140.

leaves a Chapter 1 funded school under a choice plan to attend either a different public school or a private school, the funds do not follow the child to the chosen school but remain at the school that the child has left. This, in effect, penalizes parents of disadvantaged children who want to transfer their children to the school offering the best remedial services.

The *America 2000* legislation would change the way Chapter 1 is distributed in districts with choice programs, allowing funds to follow the student to the school of choice. In areas with choice plans, local education agencies could meet the "follow-the-child" requirement by providing the services themselves at the chosen school or by making arrangements with private agencies. If the local education agency determines that neither of these options is feasible, the child's portion of Chapter 1 would be given to the parent in the form of a voucher. The parent could then purchase the services from a qualified provider.

The proposal thus does not completely empower a parent to make choices with Chapter 1 funds, but instead leaves the local authorities to determine if parents will be given a Chapter 1 voucher to purchase remedial services or be required to accept services determined by the local agency. While this proposal has garnered the most controversy, and is seen by some as a radical step, it in fact simply allows Chapter 1 to operate effectively in a district with a choice plan.

Another parental choice component of *America 2000* is a new five-year grant program to assist states and school districts that currently allow parents to choose between public and private schools and to encourage other states and school districts to introduce such parental choice programs. For this, the Administration is seeking \$200 million in grants for fiscal 1992. The Administration also is asking for a five-year grant program for "Parental Choice Programs of National Significance." The money would help evaluate and publicize choice programs. The funds also could be used to help establish choice programs, defray the costs of transportation, or to supplement parent choice directly through awarding financial certificates to parents to supplement other funds received from the state.

National Testing. *America 2000* calls for the development of new, voluntary "American Achievement Tests," which would be developed by the National Education Goals Panel, a group of governors and Administration officials created to establish standards of what American children should know in the core subject areas of English, geography, history, mathematics and science. The new tests would assess student progress against these standards in grades 4, 8, and 12. Plans for these American Achievement Tests are not included in the *America 2000* legislation, however, and it is unclear when the Administration plans to launch this initiative. Moreover, the Administration has indicated that the tests will be voluntary for states and individual schools.

The Administration may be wise to reserve its testing proposals for a separate debate. The idea of national testing, voluntary or otherwise, still is controversial to many reformers and educators who see national tests as a preemption of local control. Still, there is widespread agreement that America needs an objective system of assessment to create a national matrix of performance within which parents and teachers can gauge how their children and pupils perform.

The *America 2000* legislation also seeks to change to the existing National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). Created by Congress in 1969 to assess the performance of 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds in ten subject areas, NAEP measures a random sampling of students in each of these grades to determine how well American students perform. But this sampling merely provides an indication of how some individual students compare with the national average.

Parents of these students are barred by law from learning the test results. Until this year, the sampling did not, however, measure students against an objective standard, but only in relationship to how others performed. This year, however, students who took the math assessment were evaluated against three achievement levels. As expected, American students proved to be underprepared in math; even the best students scored low on the NAEP tests. The National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for the NAEP, plans to establish standards for the assessments in other subjects in future years.

The NAEP never was intended to assess the achievement of individual states or school districts, as is the case in national examinations in many other countries, but only to provide some indication of national achievement. States and school districts traditionally have set their own standards to assess student progress. Yet Education Secretary Alexander argues persuasively that assessing student achievement in America will remain very imprecise so long as there is no national benchmark for what students should know and no measurement of how students compare with such a standard at particular grades.

To rectify this, the legislation proposes removing the current federal prohibition on publication of district and individual school NAEP scores. States long have felt stifled by their inability to use NAEP scores to assess the performance of students in specific schools. The legislation authorizes NAEP to publish test results district-by-district and to collect and report data annually rather than every other year.

By combining testing with parental choice and school flexibility, the Administration properly sees placing schools in the limelight of objective national testing as the first step in triggering reform. It also recognizes that such testing will be useless if schools are unable to change — of their own volition or under pressure from parents or state and local governments. While testing can encourage individual students to work harder, it can only uncover the symptoms of failure in a school. It is not the cure.

Flexibility. Another key element in the Bush strategy to create better and more accountable schools is an ambitious plan to give schools more flexibility in using federal education funds. This will help schools respond to disappointing test scores and to demands for improvement. The proposed law will give the Secretary of Education the authority to waive federal rules and regulations that impede innovation. Example: a state could ask for a waiver to use bilingual education funds in a new way. If the Secretary approves the waiver request, the state then would be required to provide similar flexibility for state education funds, thus enabling schools to use the money as they saw fit to achieve the goals of the new approach.

Specifically, the legislation would give the Secretary of Education authority to waive federal regulations if he determines they “impede the ability of a school or other service provider to meet the special needs of such students and other individuals in the most effective manner possible.” In addition, other federal agency heads administering education programs, such as the Secretary of Labor, would be given waiver authority if that agency head and the Secretary of Education agreed that a current regulation is restrictive. The waivers would last three years; if progress is satisfactory, the Secretary could extend the waiver two years. States would be required to submit yearly evaluations and to ensure that civil rights and safeguards for disadvantaged children are protected.

The flexibility provisions also would give states more leeway in using Chapter 2 funds. Chapter 2 is a small federal block grant program created in 1981 that provides about \$450 million for innovations in schooling. It is the only federal program that currently leaves decision-making on the use of funds up to local school districts, but is limited to activities explicitly mentioned in the block grant authorization. The revisions in Chapter 2 are intended to permit a state to use Chapter 2 funds beyond the current scope of the grant, such as using this money to design reform projects like educational choice plans.

Alternative Certification and “Teacher Professionalism.” The Bush proposal earmarks \$25 million for states to develop alternative certification routes for teachers and administrators. This is to simplify and speed teacher-certification for professionals whose careers have not been in teaching, and so would increase the availability of good teachers. The states would be given monetary incentives to develop recruitment strategies and encourage reciprocal agreements among states to permit alternatively certified teachers to move from one state to another without having to reapply for certification.

Bush also proposes a one-time, five-year grant of approximately \$310 million for states to set up elite training institutions for public and private school teachers and administrators. In each state, a Governor’s Academy for Teachers and a Governor’s Academy for School Leaders would be established to improve the quality of administration and teaching, especially within the core subject areas of English, geography, history, mathematics

and science. The purpose of instruction in the academies is to improve teaching skills and strategies, help increase the use of educational technologies, and train teachers in curriculum development.

The Academies for School Leaders are intended to improve the effectiveness of principals and other administrators at the school level. The academies ostensibly will adopt leadership training and development strategies that have been successful elsewhere.

The legislation proposes a \$100 million Merit Schools program to recognize public and private elementary and secondary schools that are making exemplary progress toward achieving the national education goals and increasing student achievement in the five core subject areas. Merit School selection will be made by a review panel, convened by each governor, which will include educators, administrators, college faculty, parents and business and labor leaders. Use of Merit School award money will be left mainly to individual schools.

PLANK #2: Creating a New Generation of American Schools

This plank is to spur school innovation in programs and techniques for learning. The plan calls on communities to devise new methods and approaches to all facets of school operation, from privatizing school administrative functions to setting up year-round, all-day schools. Nationwide, 535 schools will participate in this program. It is no coincidence that the number of specially-designated schools equals exactly the number of U.S. Senators plus members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Nor is it a coincidence that governors would nominate specific institutions in each congressional district plus two additional schools state-wide. These then would be designated by the Secretary of Education as "New American Schools." Each chosen institution would receive \$1 million to launch its plan. The New American Schools designation is open to any public or private educational institution. It is not limited to currently-structured government schools.

The Bush Administration intends the New American School program to draw the business community into the quest for school reform. Bush proposes to create a non-profit New American Schools Development Corporation, with American business put in charge of raising the nearly \$200 million needed to fund the initial research and development teams in each congressional district before grants are awarded. These teams in turn will create models for possible New American Schools, and these models will be a strong influence in the Secretary's determination of which schools should receive the designation.

There is a danger, however, that the search for a New American School may mean more money for educational fads than for bottom-up academic reforms. The federal government for several years has run competitions among education research centers, with the aim of bringing together the best data and best minds to solve the nation's educational ills. What is troubling is that few new faces turn up in these competitions. Each seems to attract the same applicants. One reason for this is that government rules setting out

eligibility qualifications are so stringent and arcane that it is hard for any institution to qualify that is not already receiving a federal grant. The Bush-Alexander plan thus may end up having business leaders raise money to fund the same tired research institutions that have generated few creative ideas and reflect only the thinking of the education establishment.

PLANK #3: Producing a Nation of Students

This plank responds to America's adult literacy problem. Because 85 percent of the work force of the year 2000 already has left school, the goal of an educated work force in that year cannot be reached if programs deal only with today's students.

Business and organized labor already have joined forces in a number of federally-supported commissions and task forces on adult education. Among them: the Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, commonly known as the Magaziner Commission, for its chairman Ira Magaziner, the founder of the Tesis Corporation, an international consulting firm. This Commission recommends that business help the government develop standards for job-related skills and introduce "skills certificates" to certify that a worker has attained proficiency in these job-related skills. *America 2000* calls on business and labor to establish such skills standards and to develop "skills certificates" to accompany them. The plan also recommends the creation of skills clinics, in which adults could have their job-related skills assessed and be advised where to go for additional training.

There is a pressing need for steps to combat functional illiteracy in America's work force. An estimated 27 million adults are unable to read well enough to understand newspaper articles or official forms and two out of three workers' skills are outdated by new technology.⁴ By establishing skills standards and skills certificates, business and labor can create a benchmark against which the quality of a worker's skills can be measured. Like testing in the schools, skills standards will enable employers to identify those employees who require additional or remedial training. The skills clinics called for by *America 2000* would direct those who need additional training to those who can provide it.

America 2000 is seeking \$5 million in 1992 to establish regional literacy resource centers to improve coordination and delivery of literacy services. The resource centers would be operated under contract with the U.S. Department of Education by state education agencies, state literacy agencies or non-profit agencies. Funds allocated to the resource centers could be used for a number of purposes, including improvement of teaching methods and encouraging government and industry "partnerships."

4 Leonard Lund and E. Patrick McGuire, *Literacy in the Workforce* (New York: The Conference Board, 1990), p. 13.

There are three principal concerns about today's adult literacy programs. The first is that they reach just the tip of the iceberg. Only between 5 percent and 10 percent of the adult illiterate population actually are enrolled in a program. And of those who do enroll, between 50 percent and 75 percent drop out within a few weeks. According to Loyola University Professor of Counseling and Educational Psychology Joy Rogers, who has worked with illiterates for a decade, individual motivation is the key to success. The skills clinics, if designed to locate and motivate illiterate Americans, may help reduce this deficiency.

Second, the teaching methods in most literacy programs are ineffective. Many literacy programs today use the "whole-word" or "look-say" methodology, in which students memorize words without learning the relationship between letters and sounds. Yet nearly all research suggests that phonics, which teaches the relation between letters and sounds, is the most effective way to teach someone to read. Lessons that depend on adult memorization seemed sure to fail.

Third, there is little scrutiny of the hundreds of millions of dollars that governments at all levels spend on adult literacy programs. In fact, because of the number of agencies involved in literacy efforts, it is almost impossible to determine exactly how much is being spent. In particular, few literacy programs actually are evaluated on the basis of the number of people successfully taught to read. Instead, literacy programs focus on the number of students involved in the program.⁵

PLANK #4: Creating Communities Where Learning Can Happen

This plank calls for a "renaissance of sound American values — proven values such as strength of family, parental responsibility, neighborly commitment, the community wide caring of churches, civic organizations, business, labor and the media."

To create "communities where learning can happen," the Bush Administration challenges every American city, town and neighborhood to adopt his six education goals, establish a community-wide strategy for achieving them, develop a report card for measuring progress, and to demonstrate readiness to create and support a New American School. To help remove regulatory obstacles to communities wishing to act to improve their schools, the Empowerment Task Force of the Bush Cabinet's Domestic Policy Council, a committee of several senior Administration officials, will work with the National Governors' Association and other state and local officials to find the most effective ways of streamlining the bureaucratic and regulatory barriers to school innovation in federal programs.

⁵ Meredith Bishop, "Why Johnny's Dad Can't Read: The Elusive Goal of Universal Adult Literacy," *Policy Review* No. 55 (Winter 1991), p. 20.

TURNING AMERICA 2000 INTO REALITY

George Bush's legislative proposals, in their original form, could ignite a major reform of America's school system, based on choice, accountability, and innovation. These proposals at last would give some substance to Bush's claim to be America's "Education President." They would do so by putting flesh on what so far has been Bush's hollow rhetorical support for greater parental choice in education.

The trouble is that there is mounting doubt that Bush plans to stick by his *America 2000* proposal. Opposition to reform is strong, and well represented in Congress. Bush Administration officials in the past have disappointed reformers in many fields by caving into congressional pressure. The Bush Educational Excellence legislation of last year, for example, contained only a fraction of the President's original proposals. It became a Christmas tree of pet programs for key committee members. The bill died at the end of the 101st Congress.

While Bush, Alexander and other top Administration officials have advanced *America 2000* aggressively outside Washington, they may be losing the initiative in Congress. Many congressional leaders already have said privately that they have no intention of including private schools in the choice provisions. These lawmakers are trying to persuade Administration officials that choice should be a bargaining chip. If history is any guide, a concession on such a central element of the plan — especially at this early stage — will lead to other significant concessions and the entire plan will unravel. With the American people strongly backing *America 2000*, now is not the time for concessions.

Thus if the proposals are to become reality, the White House must make sure that it insists on the key ingredients of the plan. But while the central features of *America 2000* do address a number of important goals, the plan is by no means perfect. Thus lawmakers should seek, in certain instances, to strengthen the proposals.

PLANK #1: The deficiencies in America's schools can be corrected only if parents and deregulation force schools to change. For this reason, the entire *America 2000* plan will succeed or fail according to the willingness of Congress to allow choice and competition to become a central feature of the school system.

This will be the fiercest battle by far, because congressional lawmakers in the past have tended to bend to pressure from teacher and school administrator interest groups opposed to choice and deregulation. Thus while popular support for choice is high, Congress consistently has balked at giving more choice to parents. Bush and Alexander must campaign across the nation for these key features of their plan. They must demand that Congress agree to the three-pronged initiatives of choice, flexibility, and national testing and not allow any of these items to become a dispensable bargaining chip.

Meanwhile, supporters of the plan on Capitol Hill should strengthen the first plank. They should insist on choice being extended to private schools. Failure to include private schools may result in denying real choice for those who need it most – low income Americans attending the most dismal public schools. In the inner cities, restricting choice to the public schools effectively would shrink the supply of good schools available to disadvantaged children, and dilute competition. Only by including existing private schools and new providers to open schools will these parents have a real choice. And existing public schools will improve only if they no longer have a "captive market."

Since any comprehensive national test is still many years away from being instituted, there needs to be a mechanism that allows individual schools to assess their students objectively. Parents and schools thus should be able to elect to have their students take NAEP tests.

PLANK #2: To prevent the New American Schools from being sunk by worn-out ideas with new names, Congress should make the award of each \$1 million grant contingent upon state and local adoption of two reforms in each model school.

- ◆ ◆ **Relief from state laws governing teacher certification.** This would permit communities to include teachers drawn from a different background from that of most public school teachers, and so allow schools to introduce new methods of teaching.
- ◆ ◆ **Automatic waivers to all New American Schools.** The school should be free from most, if not all, state and federal spending requirements, to allow the \$1 million to be combined with other funds in the most innovative manner.

PLANK #3: Most business leaders today recognize that deficiencies in America's work force are the result of inadequate schooling. Thus many business leaders have launched work place literacy programs. So far, however, the only successful work force programs are those like the Schaumburg, Illinois-based Motorola, Inc., which insists on the successful completion of training as a condition of continued employment. *America 2000*, however, seems to assume that skills certificates automatically will create a more qualified work force. But illiteracy is caused primarily by poor basic education. Thus means that Congress and the Bush Administration must focus on strategies to improve the basic education available to Americans. This should require no new federal programs.

As its part in the battle against illiteracy, the Bush Administration should:

- ◆ ◆ **Avoid federal tampering with state and local initiatives.** The Bush Administration can encourage local and state literacy efforts and not preempt these with new federal programs. The progress in school reform at the state and local levels is the best way to combat illiteracy; the reforms are increasing local control of education and are loosening restrictions on principals and instructors. More of these efforts are needed, from ridding inner city school systems of

bureaucratic red tape to teaching traditional courses and ensuring proficiency in reading and math through high school.

- ◆ ◆ **Coordinate existing federal programs.** The Department of Education should create a bank of information for agencies and organizations seeking to combat illiteracy. The Department should analyze comprehensively existing federal programs on literacy to discover how states may use federal money more effectively.
- ◆ ◆ **Foster volunteer efforts.** Across America, volunteers successfully are educating the illiterate. This should be left free of federal and state regulation. Tutor programs at public libraries, for example, are seeking private business support to ensure their autonomy and flexibility. Business can help these efforts by providing incentives for employees to return to school or enroll in further education. Community and junior colleges should make available low cost back-to-basics coursework for those individuals requiring basic skills education or refresher courses. The federal government can assemble a data base of these private initiatives to guide others launching volunteer programs.

PLANK #4: *America 2000* emphasizes parental involvement and responsibility, and the need for communities to spearhead change. But local complacency ironically may be one of the biggest challenges facing the plan. While only 21 percent of the public give the public schools in general a grade of "A" or "B," some 48 percent of public school parents give the public schools in their own communities an "A" or "B."⁶ Student attitudes toward their own academic progress further compound the problem. Despite having the lowest mathematics proficiency among participating countries on a 1988 international achievement test, when asked whether they thought they were good in math, American students gave themselves the highest marks in the world.⁷

The most recent NAEP assessment of mathematics achievement, released in June, dramatically reconfirms the alarming gap between student achievement and student perceptions of performance. Eighth grade students in the District of Columbia, for example scored lower than every other state and territory which participated in the exam except for the U.S. Virgin Islands. But when asked, "Do you think you're good at math," D.C. students give themselves the highest marks.

Overcoming the complacency parents feel toward their own children's educational situation poses the greatest challenge to the Bush Administration's plan to involve parents in fundamentally reforming their schools. Thus Bush will have to convince parents that the problems they ac-

6 Chester E. Finn, Jr., *We Must Take Charge: Our Schools and Our Future* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), pp. 95-96.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

knowledge exist in general apply to their own schools. For this plank to be anything more than a platitude, therefore, it is essential that at the very least the NAEP results must be made available on a school-by-school basis, and ideally that schools require exit examinations for all students.

CONCLUSION

America 2000's legislative strategy has much to offer the cause of real education reform. After nearly a decade of piecemeal efforts in states and cities nationwide, there is a consensus among reformers that the major impediments to improvement are structural. Thus the key to *America 2000* is its sections on structural reform.

While the movement for reform in education will continue to spring from the state and local level, what Washington says or does has an enormous impact on the flow of legislative activity and the momentum behind popular initiatives at the local level. Thus while the states are leading the way for reform, strong leadership from Washington could rapidly accelerate the process. These who want more money, not real reform, are very well aware of this fact, and they are determined to strip away from the President's plan the most powerful instrument to force reform — parental choice.

Tangible Programs. George Bush must not let this happen. If the Bush Administration allows itself to be sidetracked by Congress, the education establishment will score a huge victory. The losers will be America's school children. *America 2000* is significant because it offers tangible programs to promote testing, flexibility and choice in the schools. Without these structural changes, the New American Schools will be home to rhetoric, not radical change.

Lamar Alexander and his Deputy, former Xerox Corporation Chairman David Kearns are well positioned to lead the campaign for the top-to-bottom reform of America's schools. They must take personal charge of the legislative battle over *America 2000*, and they must mobilize grass roots groups, business organizations and parents in a coalition to defend the plan against those who oppose fundamental change. *America 2000* is not perfect, but it addresses the sources of the problem with America's public schools and it will trigger powerful pressures to identify and correct those problems.

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