

“STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IS NOT A DEMOCRAT OR REPUBLICAN ISSUE.”

Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida, has been helping craft new education bills this year in several states. He has promoted changes based on his own efforts to transform the education system in Florida. State Legislatures spoke with Bush about the “Florida formula” and the changes he hopes to see nationwide.

STATE LEGISLATURES: What do you believe is the most pressing problem in American public education today?

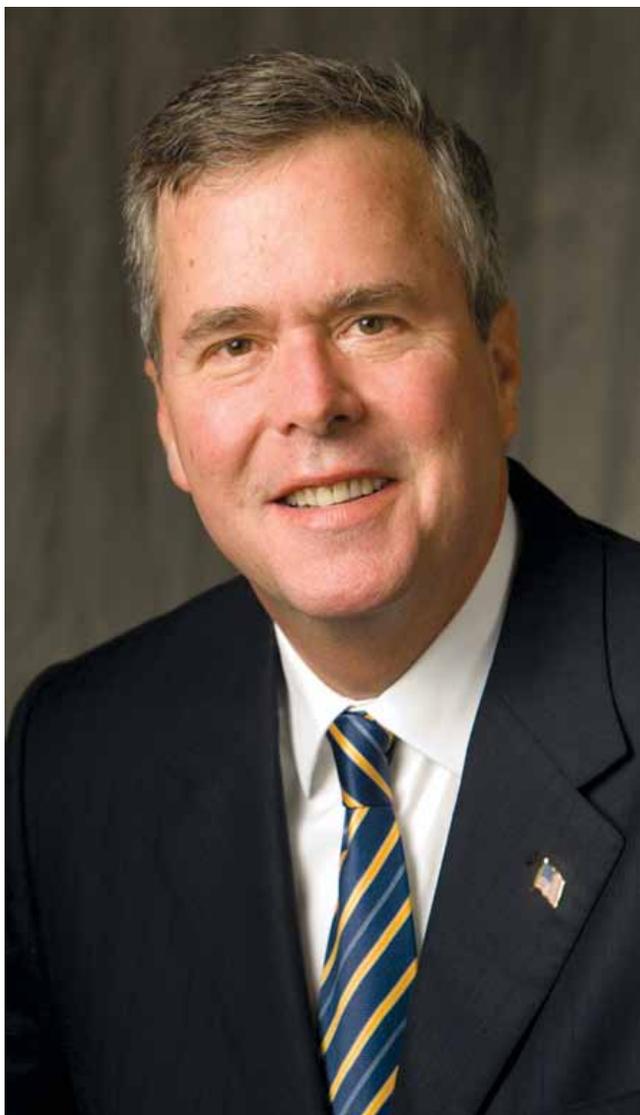
JEB BUSH: Students are not receiving the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in the 21st century global economy. Too many children enter the fourth grade without critical reading skills. Students are not achieving at the level needed, particularly in math and science. The achievement gaps continue to grow between affluent and poor, and white and nonwhite students. The success of today’s students will determine our nation’s destiny.

SL: You’ve been involved in reforming education in several states. Why do you think your “Florida formula” has been so attractive?

BUSH: Florida’s results are compelling and prove all children can learn.

Florida has a large and very diverse student population. Nearly half the students live at or near poverty, and there is a large population of English language learners. It has a low per-student funding level, when compared to other states. Yet, according to the 2009 Nation’s Report Card [a national assessment of K-12 academic performance issued by a section of U.S. Department of Education], Florida’s fourth grade students outscore the national average in reading and math.

Editor’s note: This interview is one in a series of conversations with opinion leaders. It has been edited for length and clarity.



A system of high expectations, rigorous academic standards, data-driven accountability and unprecedented array of school choice has reversed a generation of decline in student achievement.

SL: In a time of stretched state resources, what policies or services offer the best hope for eliminating achievement gaps and maintaining improved academic performance?

BUSH: Everyone wants to spend more money on education, but the focus should not just be on how much money is spent. Rather than just increasing education’s bottom line, prioritize funding for the programs that directly improve student achievement.

One way Florida does this is through the College Board Partnership. Florida took existing funds and prioritized them to provide every tenth grade student a free PSAT. It also created the AP Teacher Bonus program that awards teachers \$50—capped at \$2,000—for every student who passes an AP test.

Florida also has a school recognition program that rewards A schools or schools that have improved. The funds for this were taken from an existing pot and most of the money is used for teacher and staff bonuses.

SL: Both private and public school choice are components of Florida’s education reform efforts. Can school choice really improve public schools or will it just benefit children who are removed from the regular public school system?

BUSH: Florida has one of the broadest array of choices for parents and students. School choice empowers families with the financial freedom to choose the quality education environment that best fits their child’s learning style and needs. School choice is also a catalytic converter that accelerates reform. Research has shown the threat of a voucher improved student



achievement in public schools.

Most parents will choose to keep their students in public school, which is why it is vitally important to also advance bold public school reform.

SL: How do you respond to critics who maintain that some of the improvements observed in Florida's fourth-grade students erode by the time they reach eighth grade?

Bush: Students in middle and high school are doing better than they were a decade ago, but they are still not where they need to be. Data show students who entered the classroom under the A+ plan performed better in middle and high school than before reforms. So, we have seen improvement—the trajectory is headed in the right direction—but this is something the state continues to work on. Last year, the Florida Legislature passed a bill that increases standards in high school, particularly in the areas of math and science. Success is never final, so reform is never finished. There is always room for improvement.

SL: One of your foundation's guiding principles is that all children will achieve when education is organized around the singular goal of student success. How does that differ from what is happening now in schools?

Bush: For decades, the focus has been on the system. Florida is an illustration of what happens when the focus is on the student and the adults in the system are held accountable for students' learning.

SL: You recently teamed with President Obama to promote education reform. How do you keep

the reform effort from becoming partisan?

Bush: Student achievement is not a Democrat or Republican issue, it is a national priority. Local, state and federal leaders must focus on reforming the system so it is organized around all students learning.

SL: What do you see as the proper federal role in education reform, and what is the role of the states?

Bush: A national priority does not mean a federal program. The federal government should set high expectations for all students—no matter where they live or how much money their parents earn—and hold states accountable for achieving those expectations. Then, the federal government should get out of the way and let states lead the way on achieving—and exceeding—those expectations. Our federalist system provides 50 laboratories of reform to innovate and improve the quality of education. When states share what works and what doesn't, the whole country wins. States will compete to provide the best education because a skilled workforce will attract the best jobs and create the highest standard of living. 🏠

SL ONLINE

Watch a video of Governor Jeb Bush discussing education reform at NCSL's Legislative Summit in Louisville, Ky., in 2010, at www.ncsl.org/magazine.

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Learn how states are creating opportunities for working families.

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