



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

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COVID-19: Jeb Bush on Leadership, Federalism and the Challenges for States | June 22, 2020 | Episode 98

Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith.

This podcast is one in a series NCSL is producing about states and the coronavirus pandemic. You can find links to podcasts, webinars and other resources at www.ncsl.org/coronavirus.

Today we’re talking with former Florida Governor, Jeb Bush. Bush recently wrote an Op-ed article for the Wall Street Journal about leadership, federalism and the challenges facing states after Covid-19. We asked the governor to expand on those ideas and the tough task state lawmakers have ahead of them.

We also asked the governor, whose signature policy area is education, for his thoughts on what schools will look like post-pandemic.

Governor Bush, welcome to “Our American States.”

Bush: Great to be with you.

Time Marker (TM): 01:15

Ed: So, Governor Bush, thanks for joining us today. In the Op-ed you wrote for the Wall Street Journal recently, you said you thought the pandemic would restore respect for leadership and expertise. And while there has certainly been some extraordinary leadership in many places, there’s also been criticism. Can you talk about some examples where you’ve seen strong leadership?

Bush: Sure. I think Governor DeWine in Ohio was early to recognize the public health risk, communicated directly to the people of Ohio in a folksy way that told them the truth, was totally transparent about what the challenges were, and gave people hope and connected on a human level.

I think there are many examples, both Democrats and Republicans, mayors and governors that have shown that kind of leadership, and it starts with truth telling, because this is such an unprecedented time when we don't have all the data necessary to make a clear choice, there's a lot of uncertainty, and I think it's really important for people in public life to tell people: we don't have all the facts, but here are the facts that we do have and, based on that, this is what I'm proposing that we do.

I'm proud of the fact that states and localities have done a pretty good job dealing with all of the complexities.

TM: 02:28

Ed: So, you also mentioned in that Op-ed about a restored respect for science and competence, and that certainly seems as though it's the case. I guess the question is: Do you think that will continue? And is there any way that the folks in our audience, state legislators, policymakers, can help play a role in that?

Bush: I think there is a role for the states and policymakers in the legislatures for sure. Most of the problems that we face relate to the hyper-politization of everything in Washington.

My experience is that at the state level, there still is a way to find common ground, there still is a respect for competency, there is more accountability at the local level and state level when there's a problem. Governors, particularly, are compelled to fix the problem rather than to blame others.

So, the epidemic of disrespecting competency in government in Washington, that hasn't spread to other parts of local and state government, in my mind.

TM: 03:28

Ed: Well, along those lines, and certainly for those who have been governors and for the legislators listening, the pandemic has shown federalism in action. Can you talk about what a shift... I think you mentioned this in your Op-ed... what a shift in power from the federal government to states would look like?

We all know that the federal government over the decades has taken on so much power, but there's certainly a lot of interest, I think, in seeing states reassert themselves.

Bush: I totally agree with you that over the last three decades, the administrative state in Washington has become unaccountable and very powerful and restricting the legitimate rights of states to be able to create policies that are best for their citizens.

So, as we see the food fight in Washington... you know, look, for the last three months everybody has kind of been stuck at home watching the dysfunction of Washington unfold in front of us. I think there's going to be a desire to trust mayors and trust governors and policymakers in the state legislatures to craft policies that are more relevant to the needs of each state.

It is very different living in Montana than it is in New York City, and yet we apply the same regulations, same rules, same mandates to every jurisdiction in the country, and I think people are tired of it. I am.

So, what does it look like? It looks like a more accountable government where the federal government, through waivers and hopefully at some point the Congress of the United States will, through law, shift power back to the states.

My guess is that, take environmental policy – I think Floridians care about wild Florida, care about the water resource of Florida, more than people in Washington. And yet the constant refrain in Washington is that we're going to drive policy down if we allow states to be empowered to make these decisions.

I think they're wrong on that, and my hope is, out of the challenges of the racial strife combined with the economic dislocation combined with an historic pandemic, we'll go back to our roots where the 10th Amendment is respected again.

TM: 05:40

Ed: Well, you certainly are right that there is not just one crisis that we're living in right now; there are really three of them: the economic crisis, the pandemic, and then the protests over racial justice.

What do you think we can learn from this? You mentioned in your Op-ed that this was a learning opportunity, as most crises are. If it was up to you, what kinds of changes would the nation make as a result of what we learned?

Bush: Part of our challenge is that for some reason I think people have said politics is an extraneous ecosystem that isn't me. They see it; they get frustrated; it's I don't want to have anything to do with it. In fact, our culture creates the environment in which our politics lives, and by being...

In my case, you know, I was a road warrior. I would be gone three or four days easily every week on planes, grinding it out, building my business, focusing on my education reform foundation that I'm the chairman of, living a pretty strenuous life on the road. A lot of people were doing that. And now I realize the things that are really important are my family, my health. I can be productive, as productive.

And I think there will be a cultural change to value the things that are closer to us now than the pursuit of success or whatever has driven people in the past. And as our culture changes, our politics will change as well. And I do think it gives me hope that we can move back to a more consensus-oriented way of crafting policy.

I think there are going to be four or five interesting changes in policy that might be driven by the states. I think the issue of racial justice – there's a broad consensus now that we need to look at our criminal justice issues, deal with reforming the police departments. I think that's better done at the state level than in Washington.

There is certainly a clear case for diversion of our frail elders out of nursing homes back into the home or other places of care that are safer that can deliver higher-quality services at a lower cost. States will drive that decision. Florida is an example of long-term care diversion that has been quite successful.

I think the need for 21st century job training is going to happen. Out of this there is going to be an acceleration of trends that existed pre-pandemic of artificial intelligence, big data analytics, the convergence of this technology exploding into our lives, but creating obsolescence for many people's jobs.

And so, we're going to have to, as a nation, figure out: How do we equip people with the skills to be able to get the next generation of jobs? And we shouldn't try one thing imposed by the federal government. This should be a bottom-up approach as well to allow businesses and policymakers at the state level to craft new policies that make sense.

I think it is abhorrent that we still have a digital divide. The pandemic isn't going to go away tomorrow. It's still going to be around in some form until we have a vaccine. And we cannot have, as a nation, the increasing gaps in learning because people can't access broadband to be able to get the content necessary to be successful in learning. There should be a national strategy implemented locally and at the state level on that.

And then finally, I'd say, back to the question of politics – I do think that seeing how mayors and governors working with their legislatures and city councils work in a more consensus-oriented way will ultimately give people a path forward in Washington, D.C. as well. We desperately need... there are things that Washington has to do, and they have to do it right, and right now the gridlock is just not working.

TM: 09:30

Ed: Well, Governor, I'm glad you mentioned education. This is something I really wanted to ask you about because I know that this is the area of policy where you are really passionate, and there's so much discussion now about what schools are going to look like when they reopen in the fall, if they reopen everywhere in the fall.

What do you think we've learned? What are the big lessons we've learned in that area?

Bush: Well, again, there's a lot of uncertainty because we don't know if young people are impacted by this to the extent it appears; at least the data suggests that this is predominantly with people who have preexisting conditions and are older.

We do know that if students don't go back to school, mom and dad can't go to work, and many people can't work out of their home; they have to work in the job setting. And so, we have to

develop strategies of safety: a lot of testing, a lot of social distancing, a lot of hand washing for kids in schools.

It could be in highly dense areas you move to a Monday/Wednesday/Friday/Tues/Thursday kind of model where you're partially in school and partially at home. We definitely need to train teachers on how to teach online. We need to eliminate the digital divide, as I mentioned; that has to be part of the strategy going forward.

And I think ultimately, the opportunity here is to move to a more personalized learning model where time is the variable and learning is the constant, not the other way around; where teachers are managing the learning process and where students are more accountable and more responsible for their learning; and that we don't hold kids back if they've mastered the material, and we don't push kids along that haven't mastered it.

If we're going to deal with the inequities that exist based on income predominantly, and to a certain extent race and ethnicity, we have to deal with the achievement gap. That is the great challenge of our time. We're not going to create a more just America unless every child has the potential of being college and/or career ready by the time they finish high school.

TM: 11:35

Ed: So, do you think we're going to see a real fundamental change in schools?

Bush: The adults in the system are pretty rigid. They don't give up their economic interests for the kinds of reforms I'm describing. There will be a fight. And some states will embrace 21st century reforms and others will be mired in the old way.

Interestingly, if you look at the NATE (??) results, the states that have shown the greatest gains by and large are the states that have focused on early childhood literacy, have embraced accountability, have embraced more options for parents, parental choice, and have high expectations and real accountability around the learning process.

Mississippi, which was languishing in the very bottom, has shown incredible progress because they've embraced that broad-based reform. Florida is a good example of that. Tennessee. Other states have done the same.

So, if we really are sensitive to this, the justice issues that are pervasive that people are obviously marching in the streets to support, then, on the long-term basis, we have to deal with our education system and bring it into the 21st century.

TM: 12:46

Ed: So, how about state lawmakers – what would your message be to them as they begin to look at this? And certainly, as you've said before, this is a state level effort. So, what can they do?

Bush: Be big and bold. This is the time to fund the priorities. The tendency will be: We've got a big hole we have to fill. Washington, give us money. And we'll just keep doing the same thing over and over again. That's the default position.

But I do think there are going to be opportunities to think differently, to ask the question: If we weren't doing it this way, how would we do it? And across a whole range of issues: K12 education certainly would be a place where that's the case. Higher education is in dire straits for the structural problems that existed pre-pandemic and now the struggles of people not being able to afford college to the extent that they once did. Job training.

All of these things, I think there is the possibility of bolder reforms there. So, I would urge legislatures when they convene to deal with their shortfalls to create one or two big ideas that are funded first, to move the state forward.

The legislatures are going to have a huge responsibility to balance the budgets depending on when the special sessions are taking place. And this is the time where I think support from Washington will be essential, but also embracing reform will be really helpful.

TM: 14:21

Ed: Well, since you raised that point, certainly as states are looking at their budgets, they're seeing their increases in spending, particularly around Medicaid and, of course, sharp drops in revenue. Do you have any sense that Washington will come through with some help for states in this area?

Bush: I do think so. I think as it relates to Medicaid particularly, as was done in previous downturns, I think there will be support. What I don't believe there will be support for is supporting states that have structural problems pre-pandemic that want to be bailed out from that. I don't think that that's appropriate.

There are many fiscally prudent states that shouldn't be penalized for making the tougher decisions with regularity and dealing with their structural issues before they became so pervasive.

So, I think that's probably where conservatives in Washington are going to balk. They're not going to be too keen on providing bailouts for those problems that existed prior to the pandemic. But I do think increasing the federal percentage for Medicaid is going to be really important. I do think additional support for hospitals.

One of the unintended consequences of all this is that hospitals stopped admitting patients. They were preparing for the coronavirus patients and they did not allow elective surgeries. And so, you're going to need to support... through no fault of their own, they have huge deficits.

And finally, I'd say higher education – there has to be new thinking about how we finance higher ed through the student loan program. Just increasing the amount of monies that students borrow recourse debt on their backs without having any kind of return on investment, that's going to be challenged across the country.

TM: 16:11

Ed: Well, Governor Bush, thanks so much for taking the time to talk with us today. As we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners?

Bush: Well, I'm a huge fan of state solutions and one of the great joys of being governor for eight years was trying to understand how the legislative process worked. As a rookie governor, I made mistakes along the way and probably didn't have the patience necessary to work in tandem with the legislature. But I had great leaders that I worked with. I learned to understand their process and really appreciated the hard work that doesn't really get recognized that occurs in the 50 state legislatures across the country.

Ed: Well, Governor Bush, thank you so much for your time and stay safe.

Bush: You bet, Ed. Likewise.

Ed: And that concludes this edition of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our episodes on iTunes, Google Play or Spotify. You may also go to Google Play, iTunes or Spotify to have these episodes downloaded directly to your mobile device when a new episode is ready. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Ed Smith. Thanks for listening and being part of "Our American States."

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