

Statement of

Hon. James M. Jeffords, Chairman

Hearing on President Bush's Education Proposal

February 15, 2001

It is a pleasure to welcome you back to the committee, Dr. Paige, as we take a closer look at the ambitious education initiative proposed by President Bush.

I am delighted that the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) has a prominent place on the agenda. This committee spent much of the past two years examining elementary and secondary education programs. I want to commend all my colleagues on this committee for the focus they have brought to this effort.

This work, combined with the framework offered by the President, puts us in a position to move quickly B which we are prepared to do. The Senate leadership has indicated that floor time has been reserved during the first half of March for consideration of education reform, so the committee's work over the next several weeks is clearly cut out for us.

In general, there is broad bipartisan agreement about what we need to do.

We all recognize the need to find ways to hold every player in our education system accountable for results. That means not just supporting our most talented students, but rather taking on the challenges posed by disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and those who do not yet have command of the English language. We need to go beyond isolating students as Title I students, or IDEA students, or LEP students, and find ways to coordinate our efforts.

We all agree that children must be able to read well by the third grade, as a fundamental step in their climb to academic success. Likewise, no one questions the critical role the classroom teacher plays in student achievement, or the need for state-of-the-art training for that teacher.

Other features of the President's proposal focus on the need for early childhood programs, stronger math and science instruction, and the effective use of technology in education. All of these needs are widely recognized as deserving our attention.

We at the federal level must remember that we do not necessarily have all the answers for making high quality education accessible to all students. So, we must also provide school districts the flexibility to be innovative in implementing the kinds of reform which will meet their unique needs. And we must provide the resources needed to do the job -- not only to implement the reforms proposed by the President but also to honor past commitments.

For example, in Vermont, ninety-two percent of children with disabilities, between the ages of six and eleven years, are educated in their neighborhood schools in classrooms with their non-disabled peers. Taking this progressive approach has required an extraordinary collaboration among parents, teachers, principals, superintendents, and school boards. It is also a financial challenge. We could go a long way toward meeting this challenge if the federal government were to live up to its special education funding commitment.

For several years I was critical of the Clinton Administration for its near total neglect of special education. I am perfectly willing to be bipartisan in my criticism, but I hope there will not be any need. The Clinton Administration made the mistake of preferring its latest idea to fulfilling one of our oldest promises. I hope the Bush Administration will not follow suit.

Given current budget surplus projections, we are in a position both to honor previous commitments and to launch important new investments in education. We are at a time when the need for such investment could not be clearer. Although the recent economic boom period helped many in our nation=s workforce, many were left out.

Almost half of all adults have either dropped out of high school or not pursued any type of postsecondary education. Last year, we had to raise the cap on the number of H-1B visas

because this nation is lacking the skilled workforce necessary to address the high tech and health care industries.

Results from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study show that performance in math and science by U.S. students declines relative to that of students in other nations as students move up the grades of our school system. I had the opportunity to serve on the National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century B more commonly known as the AGlenn Commission@. The title of the commission=s report BBefore It=s Too Late@B kind of says it all.

We all need to put our shoulders to the wheel to pass comprehensive education reform legislation. I look forward to working with all the members of this committee and with you, Dr. Paige, to accomplish this goal.

Statement Of Senator Edward M. Kennedy

ESEA Hearing: Secretary Of Education Rod Paige

February 15, 2001

It's appropriate to welcome Secretary Paige back to our Committee.

President Bush and Secretary Paige deserve great credit for making education an early Administration priority. Congress shares that commitment to improving the nation's schools, and many of us are hopeful that Republicans and Democrats in Congress will work closely together to enact reforms that all Americans can support.

We agree on many areas, especially targeting efforts on the neediest schools, improving student achievement, and holding schools accountable for results. We also agree on key priorities such as teacher quality, after-school programs, early literacy, school safety, and classroom technology.

But there are significant differences, as well. We can't afford to undermine the federal investment in education by adopting state block grants that would undermine local control, that would reduce targeting to the neediest children, that would put inadequate emphasis on what works, or that would eliminate accountability for results.

Above all, we must not undermine public schools through private school voucher schemes.

Block grants and vouchers have not been proven effective. They are divisive issues that lead to needless partisan conflict.

Genuine reform of public schools requires bipartisan consensus on top priorities.

In 1994, we made significant changes in ESEA to ensure that the Act supports the development and implementation of high standards for all children. We increased flexibility, reduced paperwork, and reduced regulations by up to two-thirds for states and school districts across the nation.

We also improved the targeting of federal funds to the neediest districts. The proportion of the highest-poverty schools receiving Title I funds rose significantly at long last after our bipartisan action in 1994.

We know that more needs to be done. Public schools across the nation are facing ever greater challenges. This year, they confront record enrollments of 53 million elementary and secondary school students and 15 million college students. The number of school-age children will continue to increase steadily over the next decade and beyond.

Schools and communities will have to educate millions more children and enable them to meet higher standards of learning -- while also dealing with overcrowded classrooms, crumbling and outdated facilities, a shortage of qualified teachers, increased safety concerns, and a lack of adequate after-school activities. Schools cannot face these challenges alone. They need the help of their communities, their states, and the federal government to provide the best opportunities for all students.

The teacher shortage is especially acute. More than 2 million new teachers are needed as a result of rising student enrollments, excessive teacher turnover, and the retirement of veteran teachers. We should help communities recruit qualified teachers, provide mentors for new teachers, and effective professional development opportunities for all teachers. Clearly, one of our highest priorities in education is to ensure that students are learning from well-qualified and well-trained teachers.

So, I'm very hopeful that in the coming weeks we will be able to reach strong bipartisan agreement on all of these priorities.

Today's hearing is a step in the right direction. It's an honor to welcome back Dr. Paige. He has an impressive background as the former Superintendent of the Houston Independent School District. He has often been credited for turning Houston schools around and raising standards. He understands first-hand what it takes to bring qualified teachers into every classroom. I look forward to working with him to improve the nation's schools.