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Leading American Education into the 21st Century

The Honorable Rod Paige

PHILLIP N. TRULUCK, Executive Vice President of The Heritage Foundation: Secretary Rod Paige knows that every child deserves a quality education, that every child deserves to be treated with respect and dignity, and that no child deserves to be pushed aside or ignored—and he did something about it. He ushered in the No Child Left Behind Act, the most significant change in federal education law since 1965. For the first time, in federal law, children in poor performing schools are able to transfer to better public schools or receive tutoring at public expense. For the first time, parents can choose to help their struggling students gain access to opportunity.

Secretary Paige provided tremendous leadership in the fight to give students new opportunities to succeed. He helped the District of Columbia to become home of the first federally funded voucher program. It has, and it will change lives. The establishment said it couldn't be done. Secretary Paige proved them wrong.

Secretary Paige has called vouchers nothing short of emancipation for hundreds of poor and minority students and has said that vouchers will allow our youngest citizens to throw off the chains of a school system that has not served them well. And he is right.

Secretary Paige cares deeply about the children of America. His belief that education is the passport to freedom enabled him to make a huge difference in the lives of our nation's children. For that we are grateful. Ladies and gentlemen, here to comment on his accomplishments in office and his hopes for the

Talking Points

- Choice is a necessary condition for authentic school reform. Not just the students who take advantage of choice are helped, but the students who stay behind also are helped because the system responds by getting better.
- Charter schools are even more accountable than traditional public schools since they can be closed down if they are not serving children well and because their accountability is triggered by whether parents choose them or not.
- "Let's just continue the status quo" and being satisfied with the performance that we're getting now all adds up to what President Bush calls the "soft bigotry of low expectations."
- If we ever hope to eliminate racism in this society, we must confront this vast educational divide that's the achievement gap, because it feeds racism. No Child Left Behind is making a big difference in closing the achievement gap, and that's why all of America should support it.

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future is a true hero for our nation's children, Secretary Rod Paige.

THE HON. ROD PAIGE: Thank you for that warm introduction. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your warm applause as well. I see a lot of colleagues from the U.S. Department of Education, and I want to thank you for your presence and thank you for your help and, most of all, thank you for your friendship.

As is typical in this town, I've come to the point in time where I feel as if I'm being pinned with that inevitable "L" word—legacy. I intend to carry on my life's work, helping to improve the lives of America's youth through education. I'll be working toward that mission from a different vantage point, but it will still be a cause that's dear to my heart and one that I have no intention of letting up on.

Washington is one of the few places where what you say going out is as important as what you say coming in. Accompanied by some really great people in the Department of Education, I've been a part of some great work over the past four years. It will be up to my very able successor to continue our reforms, and I have every confidence that that's exactly what's going to happen.

The Education Revolution

But first I'd like to describe what I believe to be a nascent education revolution. This is a revolution for higher standards and higher expectations, and I don't just mean in schools. This expectations revolution is broader than that; it's in Washington, D.C., as well.

For too long, our policymakers—and I should include reformers and status-quo defenders, crusaders and bureaucrats, liberals and conservatives—all have held back. There are studies illustrating public education's shortcomings, such as the important *A Nation at Risk*, and there were speeches decrying our shortcomings; but the studies gathered dust, and speeches were soon forgotten. Meanwhile, our education system went on as usual. Many of the children went to our schools; many were educated; some dropped out; others just passed through without learning, and in the

meanwhile, we just sat back comfortably and let it happen. We simply just let it happen.

President George W. Bush broke the ice of this comfortable consensus. He told the reformers, "It's time to get busy." He told the status quo defenders, "Either embrace change or step aside." He told the civil rights leaders, "Education is a civil right. This is your issue. Join us!" Because he acted, our schools are working harder than ever before to reach and to teach every child—to leave *No Child Behind*.

I've seen the change up close. I've spent a lot of time on the road in this job: I've visited 160 schools in over 46 states. I've visited schools in the heart of Harlem and in the midst of the magnolias in Mississippi. I've taken a seaplane to Savoonga, a remote island off Alaska, and a train to New York to visit the Chinese School. What has struck me about these diverse schools is the students' universal hunger to learn, the teachers' passion to teach, and the administrators' desire to make it all work—even embedded in a system that works against those things.

In a remote village in Alaska, I remember meeting a teacher who actually lived in the classroom closet because there was no other housing available for him in that remote setting. Imagine the commitment to teaching that it requires to be in a remote village like that, living under those circumstances, just to teach children. I brought that up to point out the hard-working passion that our teachers bring to this task.

I've been heartened by these visits. They've been the best part of the job, in fact. I've enjoyed this more than anything else. I've been an educator and a practitioner in education all of my life, which is why I accepted the job in the first place, and I've been frustrated by the fact that so many of our nation's children have been just pushed to the back of the educational bus. Our civil rights leaders should focus on that: our children pushed to the back of the educational bus.

We knew the system of education in our nation was withering. "Some children just can't learn" is the unofficial, unspoken motto—and it is the problem. We let the adults in the system drive the

decisions, not the concerns of the children. When you get down to it, this is the bottom line of the problem. What are the results? Forty-two percent of our entering freshman at public two-year colleges and 20 percent of our four-year university freshman students were enrolled in remedial courses in 2000. Colleges and universities spend about \$2 billion a year on remediation. And what higher education can't fix is passed on to the business community, which spends another \$3 billion a year correcting workers' writing skills alone.

That's what the system has not been getting done, and it wasn't for the lack of money, as many try to make America believe. The most recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study found that America is spending more and getting less than any other country, including the most economically developed nations.

Stanford economist Rick Hanushek estimates that our lag in high school math alone may reduce U.S. economic growth by as much as a half percentage point every year, and that translates into about \$54 billion a year, and it's a domino effect.

We have to stop those dominos from falling. When President Bush took office four years ago, he immediately realized that the educational system needed to be overhauled, and he and I came to Washington, along with a lot of other good people, to effect that change.

I'm not an economist, but it seems obvious to me that in a free-market society, any enterprise that ignores its customers does so at its own peril. The system is a virtual monopoly. Now, we know better than this. We know monopolies don't work. We just don't put into practice what we know.

Improving Accountability and Compliance

So that's what we did. We set out to improve the system: to make it more accountable to its customers, to its children, to its parents, and to its taxpayers. And that accountability came in the form of the No Child Left Behind Act. No Child Left Behind preserves local control. States and school districts drive the standards and determine what is expected of the children in their state.

At the same time, the Department became more vigilant about ensuring that states, districts, and schools do what they're supposed to do under the law. In the interest of federalism, we lit a fire under states to fulfill their constitutional responsibility and to lead, truly lead, on education. And they are: Today, for the first time, all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have approved accountability systems.

We tried to hold the line on compliance in years past. When we go back and look at the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act—and No Child Left Behind is the eighth reauthorization of that Act—there are a lot of good things there. The problem is, the enforcement has been slack. Every time compliance bumped up against the comfort of the status quo, there were cries for waivers and for relief and delays. The attitude was let's just not do it. And what happened was, we didn't do it.

So we've decided to hold the line on it. The first principle of accountability is to let the sunshine in. Under the law, we've empowered parents and taxpayers with timely and accurate information, and with this data parents can make the right choices.

Talking About Choice

Let's speak a minute about this word choice. It's an integral part of No Child Left Behind. It is a necessary condition for authentic school reform. Anything short of this really misses the mark. In fact, successful organizations and enterprises in America and across the world today not only feature wide choice, but in many cases are customizing services to meet their customers' needs.

So why should we think that this great enterprise of education should be any different? But it has started. We're now offering choice, and that couldn't have been said four years ago. This Administration has put school choice on the books, and I think it's going to just get broader and broader; it is not going back.

It can be seen in the supplemental services part of our law. Students can choose free school tutoring and have it paid for by federal dollars. It can be seen in the form of school transfers; parents are no longer chained to schools that are not serving their

children well. And, of course, the jewel of the whole thing is the D.C. opportunity scholarships program. For the first time, the federal government is sponsoring opportunities for children to choose schools. Now 1,000 children in the District of Columbia have a whole new way of learning, a whole new set of opportunities, and they're taking advantage of them.

This Administration has also steadfastly supported choice in the form of charter schools. Charters tend to attract students who have already been left behind years ago. They often have to work twice as hard to catch up, and yet there are some who root for charter schools' failures. Shame on them. Charters are even more accountable than traditional public schools since they can be closed down if they are not serving children well and because their accountability is triggered by whether parents choose them or not. We know from studies and surveys, and especially the long waiting lines of parents, that parents love charters.

We see the larger picture too: that once you empower people with choice, the system as a whole improves. Not just the students who take advantage of choice are helped, but the students who stay behind also are helped because the system responds by getting better. Choice in and of itself is a valuable commodity.

I feel good about the fact that we've taken a stance against the monopoly and injected a healthy dose of freedom—freedom of choice. As Teddy Roosevelt once said and understood, sometimes—not a lot, but sometimes—it is good for the federal government to intervene in the interest of customers, and this is one such case.

The “Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations”

Has this stance caused some heartache? Of course, it has. Those who believe that “Some children just can't learn” also believe that “Some schools can't do anything wrong.” Despite years and years of widely publicized failure, it adds up to “let's just continue the status quo” and being satisfied with the performance that we're getting now. It all adds up to what President Bush calls the “soft bigotry of low expectations.”

I can tell you first hand that this exists. I believe that it is an attitude that is an offshoot of slavery and Jim Crow, nursed by well-meaning people and tolerated by some members of the civil rights establishment who should know better. And it's been one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the battle to close what I believe to be the most pressing social issue in this generation: the achievement gap. The wide gap between the performance of certain ethnic groups, and especially between blacks and their white peers, is a stain that has survived 40 years of righteous speeches and empty empathy and empty indignation. After 40 years of workshops and seminars and speeches, it is still here.

Closing the Achievement Gap

Let me drill down to some specifics. Just to say the achievement gap is one thing, but to think of it this way is another. By 12th grade, African-Americans are typically four years behind whites and Asian students. Hispanics are only doing slightly better. In other words, many of these students are finishing high school with a junior high school education.

Last week, the 44-nation Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed that our white 15-year-olds were beating the international OECD average, but our black and Hispanic students, by contrast, scored about 100 points lower. Blacks earn about half the number of college degrees as whites, and even those who make it have problems. As a recent study has found, nearly half of the first-year black law students are in the bottom 10 percent of their classes. What kind of message is that to send?

This year, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that outlawed racial segregation in schools. The schoolhouse doors opened, but that didn't solve our problems. Fifty years later, we're still struggling. Access has not always meant achievement. Equality must be linked with quality: a quality education for all students. Of course, parents and the larger community have a role as well. Schools must—and I mean must—make the difference. It can be done. Just go down to the KIPP Academies and take a look, and many other schools similar to the KIPP Academies.

If we ever hope to eliminate racism in this society, we must confront this vast educational divide that's the achievement gap, because it feeds racism. No Child Left Behind is making a big difference in closing the achievement gap, and that's why all of America should support it. It would eliminate the need for race-based quotas and preferences because it would ensure that every single child, regardless of race, creed, or color, is taught and taught well.

Now, the government can't do this alone. Civil rights leadership must become a part of this. The community must become a part of this. The achievement gap is a crisis, and it is the crisis of our generation. It is well beyond empty workshops and talk. We need to put aside partisanship when it comes to this problem. We should face this problem head-on. We should even forget about party affiliations for a moment and focus on the No Child Left Behind Act for what it can do for children.

It's making a big difference. Consider this: According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Council of Great City Schools, and other studies, children who are traditionally left behind—and this group includes African-Americans, Hispanics, low-income students—have been the driving force behind recent gains and test scores in big cities where we've heretofore thought the educational system could not provide great education. The percentage of African-American and Hispanic fourth graders who know their reading and math basics increased substantially more between 2000 and 2003 than in the previous Administration's eight years combined. So a big difference has been made, and they'll continue to improve if we stay true to the great principles of the No Child Left Behind Act and move away from learning fads toward more scientifically proven instructional programs, such as the President's great Reading First program.

Today, we had some more confirmation of our efforts. The 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study showed that a nation of young learners significantly improved their skills over time, and against the rest of the world as well, and that black and Hispanic students are making

the biggest gains and are moving toward closing the achievement gap.

Still, there's much more to do, and the new PISA results indicate that our 15-year-olds lag behind the rest of the world in mathematics and problem-solving skills. The principles of No Child Left Behind are working for our fourth and eighth grade students, so isn't it logical that we should move it toward ninth, 10th, and 11th grade students as well? This is exactly what the President has proposed.

Winning the Battle of Ideas

We're winning the battle of ideas. When the nation was declared at-risk two decades ago, concepts like parental choice, charter schools, and accountability for results were things that we could not even talk about clearly. They could not be conceived to be a part of the solution. But thanks to the work of scholars and activists and educators and parents and dreamers and doers and people like you, these ideas are now embedded in the law of the land.

Change is here. Change in America is what this is all about. But you can win the battle and still lose the war, and we're at a very important turning point right now. We must keep reform moving forward and continue the leap of ideas and push them toward implementation.

Here's what I mean most specifically. We fought too hard to create excellent charter schools and opportunity scholarships to ignore the bad apples and the fly-by-night operators in the lot, so we must not only talk the talk, but walk the walk. Charter schools that are not performing well should be closed. These schools should not be allowed to operate. We must get serious about shutting down failing charter schools. We must embrace fiscal accountability in voucher programs as well and insist that these programs operate properly.

We must also move all states' information systems toward the 21st century and move away from this punch-card mentality into 21st century technology. Too many states even now have their financial records in shoeboxes and are not able to

account for the vast amount of dollars that the federal government is pushing out into the states.

So accountability should be included not only as a part of what goes on in the classroom, but also in the operation of these programs and in fiscal accountability as well. And we must work toward promoting and hiring based on merits, not just based on how long you've been there.

Together, we've changed expectations and the conversation in America. Now we must make these ideas continue to work in practice, and I'm confident that my successor, Margaret Spellings, is more than up to that task.

The Naysayers

Let me close with a few last thoughts about reform. You know there are those who will remain opposed to reform in the face of any and all evidence to the contrary. We've collected a few examples that we have labeled the "Sour Grapes Awards."

The first award goes to the National Conference of State Legislatures, whose leaders said that "the recent gains are not really a result of an increase in student performance." I think that should be recognized.

Our second award should go to the president of the Ohio Education Association, who said, "We're thrilled with the results we heard in lieu of the fact that we have a No Child Left Behind Act imposed on Ohio from the federal government." That's good too.

Finally, there's the Center on Education Policy, whose director made this profound statement: "No Child Left Behind is a flawed strategy that will lead to greater student achievement."

Conclusion

In my lifetime, I've participated in the major educational milestones of the 20th century as it relates to education, and now into the 21st century. I've seen a lot of things change in education.

I attended segregated elementary and secondary schools where the only textbooks I ever saw were hand-me-downs from the all-white school down the street. I can remember me and my teammates and friends playing basketball on clay courts, which was my first idea that something wasn't

right, when other guys had a gymnasium down the street.

I attended a historically black college—there was no such thing at that time, in our community, as choice. I was a junior at Jackson State in 1954 when the *Brown* decision came down. We greeted it with naive jubilation because we thought that a new world of opportunity would open up for us the next day, only to learn that that was not the case.

A decade later, I saw, with enthusiasm, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act enacted in 1965. It tried to pick up where the *Brown* decision left off, but even that law, while well intended, had few teeth in it. People simply ignored it. We're now in the eighth reauthorization of that, and for seven reauthorizations we just pretended the law was not there and continued to do what we've always done: We spent the money, but as far as reform was concerned, we didn't do much of that.

We kept reauthorizing this law anyway, year after year, on schedule and unchallenged, whether or not the children were actually getting better. It was as if nobody was hearing the trees falling in the forest about which *A Nation at Risk* warned us. Problem was that the system was unaccountable to taxpayers and the parents, so now we are at another turning point, and we're going to try it again.

We tried it again with the No Child Left Behind Act, and we're off to a good start. I believe we've reached a turning point and we must stay the course. No Child Left Behind opened the system to scrutiny. It brought sunshine into the system, visibility, set concrete expectations, and set about achieving them, and we have now only to enforce them. It sent a strong message: If you take federal dollars, we expect you to be accountable for that investment, and we expect student achievement, not just for some students, but for all students. And I'm proud to say that the law's here to stay.

And I am proud to say that the law is here to stay. Even *Education Week*, the voice of the educational establishment, admitted as much in a recent article titled "Taking Root." Look at that. I might even frame this one!

Now we must see that these roots do not wither. They must grow into trees of knowledge. It will take time. By the year 2035, it is estimated that the GDP from a well-educated citizenry will pay for our entire education system—but only if we stay the course.

We have learned a few lessons about Washington and how it works. And I'm deeply appreciative for those lessons; but I know we're on the right track, and I know that we are seeing progress. And I know this progress is only going to get greater. I'm going to watch this progress from a different vantage point, and I'm going to be beaming from ear-to-ear because I know that children are going to continue to grow as long as we stay true to the No Child Left Behind Act principles.

As Abraham Lincoln said in his farewell address in Springfield on his way to Washington:

To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything.... I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington.

I'm going to turn that around, and we'll look at it as making a trip the opposite way, the trip home. Allow me to finish President Lincoln's heartfelt words by saying, "Let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope your prayers will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell." Thank you for inviting me, and I hope that we've done some good.

—*The Honorable Rod Paige served as U.S. Secretary of Education from 2001 to 2005.*