

AN AGENDA FOR GEORGE BUSH'S EDUCATION SUMMIT

George Bush recently invited the nation's governors to Washington on September 27 for a "summit" on education. The purpose: to hammer out a plan to reform America's failing school system.

Several governors already have responded to the presidential call by asserting that what really is needed is more federal money. Others are expressing fears that they will be asked to shoulder more of the responsibility for improving education without being given the resources they claim to need. These governors note that recent congressional legislation mandates states to assume more of the burden of funding for health and welfare, and they suspect that education will follow suit.

Even though there is overwhelming evidence that more money is not the answer to the nation's education problems, the suspicions of governors about the summit are understandable. This should not cloud the fact that the summit is needed — not to box in the states and force them to pick up more of the education tab, but to seek ways of removing roadblocks that impede the states from improving education. The states already are setting the pace in education reform. It is the states that are introducing wider choice for parents to spur more competition among schools; and it is the states that are in the vanguard of school management innovation. Thus what Bush needs to do is to soothe the worries of the governors by assuring them that instead of the summit imposing new burdens on the states, it will seek ways to make it easier for the states to introduce more reforms of the kind they are already pioneering.

In particular, at the summit Bush should:

1) Announce that he will issue an Executive Order to free states from cumbersome federal rules that frustrate state education innovation. He also should challenge the states to do the same for their local governments.

Many innovative education reforms are impeded by federal red tape. Example: Washington imposes numerous restrictions on the use of Chapter 1 funds, which serve the needs of disadvantaged students. Thus states are prevented from using these funds creatively. Freeing up this money would allow states to experiment with proven innovative methods of instruction.

Shortly after he took office, Bush pledged to remove cumbersome regulations to make it easier for schools to experiment. The Department of Education is exploring ways to clear away these barriers. Bush should announce to the summit that once this review is complete, he will issue an Executive Order to eliminate regulations that impede reform.

Bush also should challenge the states to follow his lead and clear away red tape at the state level. Education mainly is regulated by state houses, not Washington. Schools must abide by copious state regulations, many of which interfere with a school's ability to improve the quality of education. Examples: teacher certification requirements, vocational education and basic course requirements, and restrictions on the use of school facilities can constrain creative approaches by

schools. Bush should call on the governors to remove such burdensome red tape and allow their school districts to explore new ways of dealing with the old problems.

2) Seek agreement by the summit for the goal of a school choice plan in at least thirty states within two years.

The experience of Minnesota and Iowa confirms that allowing parents a degree of choice over which school their child will attend significantly raises the quality of education. Bush should signal his determination to see more state-wide choice plans by announcing a target to be reached in two years. He could provide each state that enacts educational choice for parents with a bonus federal grant and technical assistance to administer the new plans.

3) Call for a Commission on Business Support for Education.

Business is spending some \$40 billion on education this year and thus is taking an urgent interest in education reform that could reduce the high tab for remedial education for their employees. Countless reports and studies calling for reforms have been issued by business groups; firms are collaborating with educators, parents, and public policy experts to develop new strategies.¹ Yet businesses' efforts often are unfocused. The President should join with the governors at the summit in calling on the nation's corporate leaders to establish a Commission on Business Support for Education. Patterned after the Grace Commission, which highlighted waste in the government budget, the product of the Commission would not be more studies or research. Instead it would highlight those strategies that have been improving education and indicate practical ways in which business can stimulate reform.

4) Announce that he will order the Department of Education to assist states in reforming education. Bush also should call on each governor to appoint a senior staffer to deal exclusively with parental choice.

States are taking the lead in promoting choice in education. But while the Department of Education supports these moves, many of its staff lack the direction or authority to help states reform in this way. Bush should tell the governors that the Department now will work closely with the states to develop strategies to promote choice. To help this, Bush should ask each governor to appoint a "choice advisor" to work closely with the Department on reform measures.



Bush's call for an education summit is a recognition of the crisis in American education. Something needs to be done to reverse the breakdown in quality of a school education. And by inviting the governors to the summit, Bush recognizes that he feels the best hope for reform lies in action by the states. What he must do at the summit is develop a battle plan to unlock the pent-up creativity of America's state houses.

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¹ Some of these are outlined in a forthcoming special issue of The Heritage Foundation's *Education Update* newsletter reporting on a Heritage conference, "Can Business Save Education: Strategies for the 1990s." The full proceedings of this conference are available from The Heritage Foundation as *Heritage Lecture* No. 193.