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No School Choice but to Improve; Change in Public Schools Is Not Optional, Hickok Believes; [FINAL Edition]

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For Undersecretary of Education Eugene W. Hickok, support for all manner of school choice -- charter schools, private school vouchers, magnet schools, online schools -- is not simply a matter of his conservative political ideology, but also a matter of logic.

"I feel American public education needs to go through a transformation and school choice should be a part of it," he said. "It's common sense."

It is a vision that Hickok pursued in Pennsylvania, where he served six years as education secretary under then-Gov. Tom Ridge (R) before being named to Education Secretary Roderick R. Paige's executive team in 2001 in the Bush administration.

In Pennsylvania, Hickok was part of an administration that redefined public education. The state led much of the nation in developing a full menu of school choice options. Among other public school options, Pennsylvania offers charter schools, online charter schools and privately managed schools. The state also established rigorous learning standards backed by an aggressive law that has allowed the state to take control of financially mismanaged or low-achieving school districts, including those in Chester and Philadelphia.

It is an approach to public education that Hickok is now helping to implement nationally. In his post, he oversees a broad swath of federal education initiatives, including the implementation of No Child Left Behind, the law central to the Bush administration's plan to remake the nation's public schools.

The year-old law greatly expands the federal role in education and helps shape what students are taught by awarding grants for teaching programs that are grounded in research recognized by the federal government. It also requires schools to test students in grades 3 through 8, and then holds schools accountable for the results. Students who attend underperforming schools may transfer to better public schools or receive private tutoring with public money. If schools continue to perform poorly, they can eventually be reconstituted, converted to a charter school or be turned over to private managers.

The Bush administration says the law will wake up a slumbering educational bureaucracy by focusing not on the needs of the nation's school systems but on the students themselves.

"Schools need to be responsive as opposed to insular," Hickok said. "I think it is just my general approach to public policy. You see a monopoly, you see a system that is not measuring up in so many ways, you need to find ways to change that system."

Researchers have disagreed about the educational impact of some of the most hotly contested school-choice options. While some have found that certain groups of students performed better in charter schools, in privately managed schools or when they receive vouchers for private schools, others say the educational gains are nil.

The "evidence is mixed" when it comes to the academic efficacy of charter and other schools under the choice rubric, Hickok said. But, he added, having a range of options frees schools to more closely tailor their programs to different types of students -- something that will benefit public education in the end.

That sentiment helped propel the No Child Left Behind Act through Congress with bipartisan support. But soon after President Bush signed the measure into law in January 2002, it became embroiled in controversy.

Congressional Democrats have argued the federal government has not provided enough new money to effectively implement it. State school officials are worried that the law may prove overly punitive and result in many public schools being labeled underperforming, even if they are educating the vast majority of their students. Also, there is widespread concern about how school systems are going to meet federal targets requiring special education students and those with limited English skills to pass standardized tests.

Tom Houlihan, executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, an organization representing top state education officials, said a recent survey of his group's members found many of those issues "still very much up in the air."

Still, he said, state education leaders have been impressed by the attention Hickok and others at the Education Department have brought to their reviews of state plans for imposing the federal law's testing and accountability provisions.

"Literally, every chief state school officer has commented on how understanding, congenial and concerned [Hickok] has been during the peer review process," Houlihan said.

Hickok acknowledges that the new law is going to bring painful changes to local school districts. But he says that is a good thing.

"I guess I worry less about the numbers of schools identified than I do the kids in those schools," Hickok said. "The fact is we need to do a much better job. . . . We can rationalize this or run around that, the fact is that as a country, we are just not doing the job we should do."

Compounding concerns about the law are budget crises burdening nearly every state, forcing many to cut education funding. In California, for example, an estimated 25,000 teachers have received layoff notices this spring, which are required under state law if school districts are considering cutting teacher jobs.

"I think the economic challenge at the state level makes it tougher," Hickok said.

But, he added, the choices that schools make in spending money can be as important as how much money they have to spend. "Money matters, I'll admit that," he said. "It's how you spend

money most of all. I have been in too many places where what is missing is not money, it's attitude. What's missing is will."

A former professor of political science and public policy, Hickok became involved in public school administration when he was elected to fill a school board vacancy in Carlisle, Pa., in 1993, while teaching at Dickinson College. He ran because he had two children in Carlisle's public schools and had experienced some "frustration" dealing with the school system.

While serving as Pennsylvania's education secretary, Hickok was a founding member of the Education Leaders Council, an organization of state school chiefs dedicated to expanding the boundaries of school reform.

He also worked in the Reagan administration as a special assistant in the Justice Department and as a scholar at the Heritage Foundation. But despite those conservative credentials, Hickok says his views on education grow not from his political ideology, but from a sense of pragmatism. And the goals of the No Child Left Behind law are straightforward, he said, not a stalking horse for a school voucher program as some critics fear.

"It's stunning to me that we, the wealthiest nation on earth, can have 60 percent of our kids in certain places not able to read. We ought to be outraged by that. So this really is a public school reform. It is not about a hidden agenda."

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