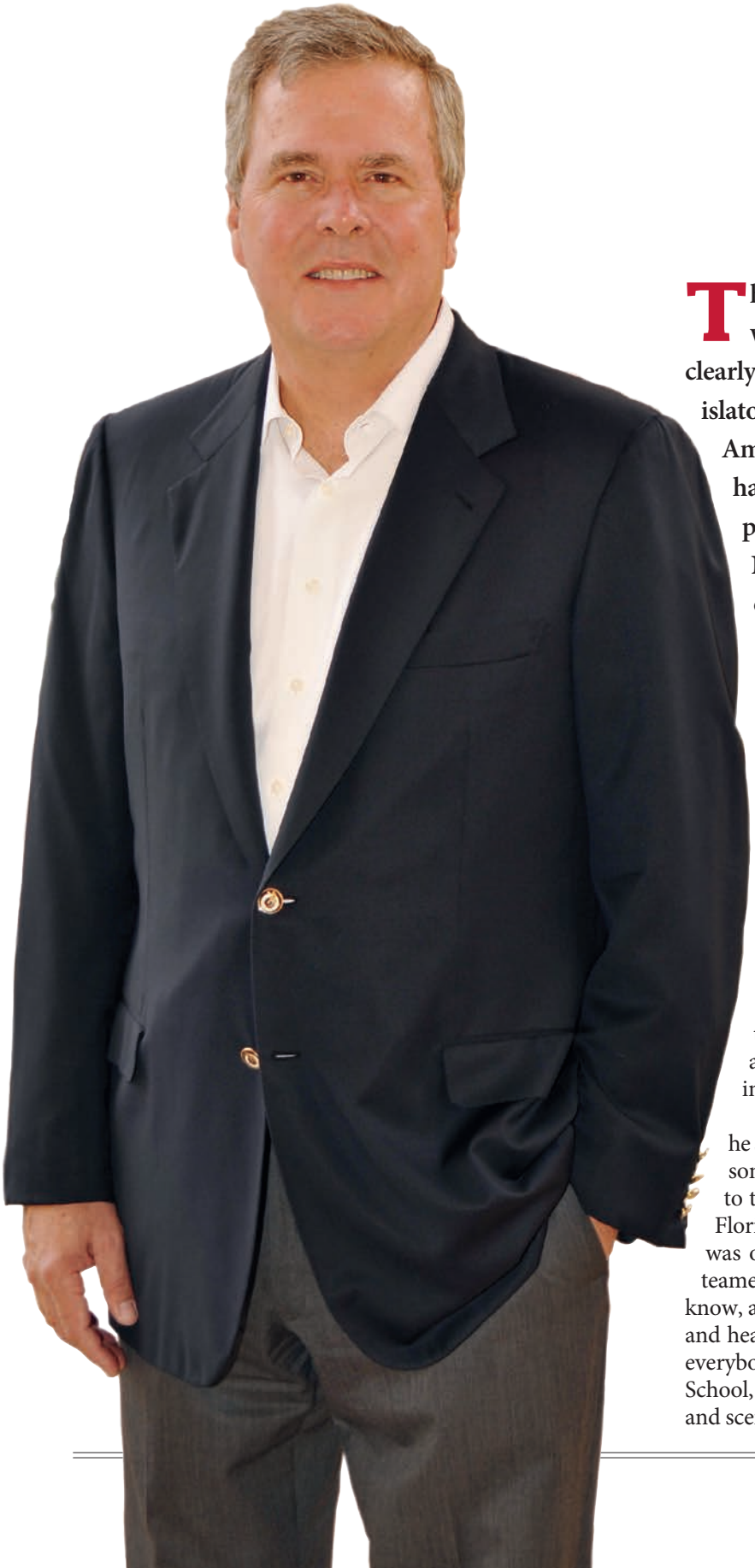
Advice for Education Reformers:



The question was one that would have sent many white politicians scurrying for cover. And it was clearly a question that the group of visiting state legislators from North Carolina, half of them African American, had discussed in advance. After all, they had come to Miami, thanks to Darrell Allison, president of Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina, a Raleigh-based school-reform organization, for a two-day event hosted by Jeb Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcelinEd), to get advice about education reform, and they didn't want to embarrass the host. But it had to be done.

"With all due respect, Governor," the black man started, a bit hesitantly. "How do you convince African Americans that they can trust a white man? A Bush?"

The former two-term governor of Florida and a 2012 presidential hopeful for many Republican Party stalwarts (Bush endorsed Mitt Romney on March 21) listened carefully, smiling at the allusion to his blue-blood family reputation—and white skin. Bush had taken his suit coat off at the beginning of the luncheon and engaged in easy banter with the visitors while noshing on a chicken-salad sandwich.

"It's a common concern across the policy spectrum," he said, "and not just in education." The 58-year-old Bush, son of one president and brother of another, proceeded to tell the story of his opening the first charter school in Florida, in 1996. (He did not mention that the charter law was one he had helped push through the legislature.) "I teamed up with Willard Fair, whom I'm sure many of you know, and we started a charter school." Fair is a black activist and head of the Urban League of Greater Miami. And most everybody knew something about the Liberty City Charter School, named after one of Miami's poorest neighborhoods and scene (in 1980) of the worst race riots since the 1960s.

PHOTOGRAPHY / JOSEPH P. GALLAGHER

Be Bold!

A conversation with Jeb Bush

By PETER MEYER

"We worked at it," says Bush. "We had to build it first and we were sweeping floors together," he told his guests. "We had 90 kids in K through 2—little dudes. We had to get the uniforms. It was an amazing experience. And this was Friday before the Monday we were supposed to open. I was walking out, it was maybe four o'clock, and it dawned on me that we didn't have a flagpole. If we're going to be a first-class school, we've got to have a flagpole. You've got to have the Pledge of Allegiance when the school opens. So it extended my workweek. We ended up getting the flagpole, buying the flag. And at seven thirty in the morning, when school was supposed to start, we had a little 3rd grader or 2nd grader do the Pledge with all these kids in uniforms with moms and dads and teachers. It was something else. Willard and I were close—we still are. I kid him: he's my brother by another mother."

The room melted. Sweeping floors? At a school for poor African Americans? Brother by another mother? This guy was the real deal.

The Florida Miracle

Florida students under Jeb Bush made some remarkable progress (see "Florida Defeats the Skeptics," *check the facts*, page 64). Florida was the first state to start grading its schools, A to F, based on student performance; it stopped social promotion in 3rd grade; it paid teachers more if their students performed better; it gave parents more choice, with vouchers and charters; and it revamped the teacher certification process to let more people into the pool.

If you ask Bush the secret to his education reform success, he'll say "hard work." But one of the surprising pieces of advice Bush passes on to would-be education reformers is to "be bold." One might think, for a governor who managed to get so much education reform passed in his state, that he would have suggested a more pragmatic, at least, incremental, approach.

"On the big things you've got to be impatient and you can't accept compromise," he insists. "You can accept consensus, but you can't accept compromise, particularly if compromise yields mediocre results."

Mediocre results, as Bush sees it, only embolden those who oppose reform and make the next reform effort harder. "Education reform needs to be focused on student learning," he says. And it needs to be focused on the big picture. "You challenge people by pointing out that only a third of our children are college and/or career ready after a K–12 experience, where we spend more per student than any country in the world. If someone can come up with an improvement on that number with the current systemic flaws, then I'd be all for it. But I don't think that's possible."

Bush, though out of office for nearly five years, continues to spread his reform ideas. He established his Foundation for Excellence in Education in 2008 "to ignite a movement of reform, state by state, to transform education for the 21st century." Bush argues for "a suite of reforms," based on his Florida success, that need to be "implemented faithfully and in a focused way." That suite includes "public and private school choice," which would be "a catalyst to improve the system"; better teacher training and evaluation; school evaluations based on student performance; and more digital learning. His ExcelinEd team hosts visiting policymakers in Miami, where Bush has his offices; he also sends the team around the country to advise and train education policymakers on these reforms. He organizes and supports a group of state education leaders called Chiefs for Change; and, with former West Virginia governor Bob Wise, he's pressing another initiative, Digital Learning Now!

It's an ambitious agenda, especially for someone who claims to spend most of his time attending to his business-consulting and real estate–development enterprises.

"I am motivated by looking over the horizon and seeing a country in decline," says Bush about his education efforts. Sitting in a small office on the gorgeous grounds of the Biltmore Hotel estate (which once played host to Hollywood and European royalty), Bush is happy to be "a mile from home and ten minutes from the airport." Pictures of his wife, kids, and granddaughter, along with mom, dad, and big brother, dot one wall; a large American flag hangs on another. "Education outcomes have always been important," he says. "But now it's critical, because it really does define one's destiny over the long haul."

Raise the Bar

I tell Bush the story of a social studies teacher in my district who advocated strenuously against the new "college-ready"

push by the Obama administration because, as the teacher said, "Not everybody is made for college."

"OK," Bush laughs, "let me see a show of hands of people who think that we should spend more per student than any country in the world for 12 years and then say, 'Well, OK, fine, you graduated but you're really not college-bound or career-ready.' What's the point? What's the purpose of school? We can babysit the kids if they're not there to learn."

Bush is adamant about giving every child the opportunity to say no to college; failing to prepare them for college is not an option. "I mean, how can you define success when someone gets a piece of paper that says, 'You have graduated from high school, now please take remedial courses at your community college so you can go to college'? So for your social studies teacher who doesn't think being college-ready is right,… I would argue that it is criminal to have low expectations for kids because it guarantees that they won't achieve much of anything."

Bush's sense of injustice on this point is palpable. "Think of the huge economic cost of hundreds of billions of dollars nationally that go to redo what was not done. Community colleges in this country spend an enormous amount of time basically being a second high school. Is that what we aspire to as a nation? Are we comfortable with this? What I don't understand is why, in a great country, where we excel in so many things, we accept mediocrity in something so incredibly valuable. Why wouldn't we say, 'Let's try something different'?

"The level of expectations is what determines the results," says Bush, who recalls his successful 1998 run for governor, when he visited 250 schools across the state. "I remember there was a 12th-grade kid who could not pass the—at that time it was called the HSCT, the High School Comprehensive Test. It was the graduation test, and Florida was one of the first states to have one. I saw this kid struggle with the question, 'A baseball game starts at three and ends at four thirty. How long is the game?'"

At the time, Florida had the worst graduation rate in the nation.

One of the first things Bush did after assuming the executive duties in Tallahassee was to raise the graduation requirements to the 10th-grade level. "It's still too low," he says, "but the graduation rate has gone up. The percentage of students who did not graduate because they could not pass the test went down. That runs counter to what people inside the system believe."

I suggest to Bush that those arguing that college is not for everybody, from a low expectations viewpoint, sound similar to those who argue that we can't fix schools until we solve poverty. He laughs. "I didn't even realize that people believed that until I read Paul Peterson's essay on the broader, bolder bunch (see "Neither Broad nor Bold," *check the facts*, Summer 2012). (Bush chairs the advisory committee for the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University, run by Peterson.)

No Silver Bullet

Despite his many criticisms of the education system, Bush is quick to point out that "There are great people inside these failing schools…. There are very good people, very dedicated, and they overcome all the odds to assure the children learn. Those miracles happen each and every day. My focus and the focus of our foundation is on how you create systemic change so that more often than not learning happens."

Still, he says, "there is no one silver bullet and that's hard to take in a world of immediate gratification and a world of do something now…. This is a long-term struggle and it requires a multitude of things happening."

Bush thinks his brother's signature education legislation, No Child Left Behind, has taken some unfair hits and that the debate has been improperly framed. "It's not local control versus federal control," he says. "If you give control to school districts that are basically monopolies, that are insular, and where there's no accountability that's not going to yield a result that will equip the next generation with the

tools they need. And if you say the federal government is the end-all and be-all and needs to use its economic power to drive policy, that's not going to work either."

Education improvement needs to be "a national priority," Bush believes. "Parents, business leaders, political leaders, all of us need to be actively engaged to ensure that we protect our success as a nation by dramatically improving student learning. A national purpose is not a federal program … I actually think that the best way to do this is to use the federalist model. It has worked. Why would we abandon the federal system now?"

Bush calls attention to Mitch Daniels, governor of Indiana, who pushed his state legislature to adopt "the most dramatic suite of reforms in one [legislative] session than anybody's ever done." This was not "imposed by anybody else, it's not top-down-driven, and it's not from Washington saying you have to do it this way," says Bush.

But not everyone is Mitch Daniels or Jeb Bush, I suggest.

This is where Bush sees the advantages of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top over Title I. "The first, he points out, "didn't dictate an accountability system, just that states had to have one. And Race to the Top has had the effect of changing bad behavior in return for the money." Race to the Top has "had a positive effect, particularly on states that had done nothing. Both of those [federal laws] had a positive effect in that they used the power of the purse to create a climate in which states would do things. It didn't take state authority away. If it weren't for No Child Left Behind, there would still be 30 states that had no accountability systems at all, maybe more."

"If you give control to school districts that are basically monopolies, that are insular, and where there's no accountability, that's not going to yield a result that will equip the next generation with the tools they need."

The Common Core and PARCC

Where does this put Bush with respect to the Common Core curriculum that has been adopted by more than 40 states and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), the consortium of states working to develop a common set of K–12 tests? Some conservatives have blasted these efforts as a thinly veiled national curriculum.

"Well, I believe that we've diluted standards to the point where we don't have them in the states," he says. "Yes, some states have very rigorous standards. But there's a need for higher standards, whether they're common or not. I think it adds value if they're common, because it creates the chance to develop a rich array of strategies to achieve them."

Can we trust the states or school districts to increase these standards or do we need a cop on the block? And is that cop going to be the feds?

"Well," says Bush, "45 states have embarked on this journey. So I think we can trust states that have volunteered to improve their standards. The real challenge is going to be when there's an awareness of—an awakening to—the fact thatwe've created a set of standards that only a third of our kids can meet. Then we will see real quick who will stay the course and apply these higher standards and have lower graduation rates than the phony ones we have today."

The Road to Reformer

Born in Texas in 1953, Bush says the nation's education slide began "at least two generations ago," though he didn't appreciate that until much later. At the time he was in high school at Phillips Andover and taught English as a second language in Mexico, as part of a Phillips Academy student-exchange program. While there, he met Columba Garnica Gallo, whom he would marry after graduating Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Texas (with a BA in Latin American studies).

While helping his father from time to time in his presidential bids, Jeb spent the next 20 years in business and finance, moving to Miami in the 1980s, where he became a successful real-estate developer. He was chairman of the Dade County Republican Party and served several years as the state's secretary of commerce. It was in this job that he discovered education. "I went around the state asking, 'What can we do to build a better business climate? How can we attract more industry, more businesses to our state?' People had different ideas on a lot of things, but almost unanimously they said, 'We need to make our education system a lot better.'"

Though he lost a close race for the governorship to incumbent Lawton Chiles in 1994 (the same year brother George won the Texas gubernatorial bid), Bush set up a nonprofit, the Foundation for Florida's Future, which would keep him focused on public policy and education until the next election, in 1998, which he won handily.

Speaking of the defeat of the parent trigger law in Florida, Bush says, "Only in a Kafka novel and the Florida legislature would the PTA oppose giving parents a voice."

Florida and Beyond

What Bush was able to do during his two terms at the helm of the Sunshine State is considered by some to be miraculous.

"We fought hard," he says. "We fought with intensity. A lot of people want to hear that there was a *Kumbaya* moment where somehow people who were deeply divided about these approaches came together and held hands and sang pretty songs. There's been a little of that, but there's been more of just a constant push to yield better results. And as those results became clearer, then the opposition to the reforms that helped create those results subsided, and it allowed for the next conversation to take place."

He also "reinvested those early successes back in reform. We created a sustainable environment for reform so that long after I left, it is embraced by members of the legislature and other governors." And, of course, he's got the improvement data to validate reforms.

"We've had pretty constant improvement," he says. "It was a data-driven policy initiative and we had to hope that the data would prove that we had learning gains. And we did…. We went from the bottom of the pack to above the national average in 4th-grade reading."

It's not surprising that he has taken the show on the road. "If a state senator or head of an education committee has an idea about school choice, or digital learning, or a robust accountability system, the first step is to talk to the people who have already done it," he says. "It takes away a lot of the mystery if you can share the experiences of, say, Florida on school choice."

One of his major reinvestments in reform was starting Chiefs for Change.

"The experience of changing systems by changing laws is only one part of the journey," Bush explains. "The other part is that you have to implement those laws and that's the executive branch's responsibility. And we found that that was the hardest part, because the resistance to change—you're asking people inside monopolies to open up their systems and be held accountable when they never have been. It's difficult."

Bush reached out first to Tony Bennett, education chief in Indiana; Eric Smith, former education commissioner of Florida; and Gerard Robinson, then secretary of education in Virginia. He offered support services for meetings and best practices so they "can act as one on the things that they have in common." Today, the group has 10 members.

"It requires intensive efforts to cooperate, to cajole, to encourage, and to understand the challenges," says Bush. "So, governors and state school officers really matter, because without their active involvement and their empowerment to execute effectively, the best ideas that become bills and then become laws can be killed by a thousand cuts or be implemented in the wrong way."

Bush hatched his latest initiative, Digital Learning Now!, after reading Clayton Christensen's *Disrupting Class*. "I found it very compelling," he says. "We need a more customized learning experience, where students, once they master subjects, aren't held back and aren't pushed along if they haven't mastered it. We need to use technology, which really didn't even exist five years ago, as a tool, to make content interesting and relevant for students, particularly in the high school grades."

A Kafka Moment

I can't leave without asking how this man with such huge sway in the Florida legislature lost the parent trigger fight last February. Bush had lobbied for it, even writing op-eds urging legislators to pass a bill that would give parents the power to turn a failing school into a charter.

"Well, the parent trigger defeat was not about the parent trigger," smiles Bush, ever the political strategist. "It brought back memories of the last days of other legislative sessions—and I had quite a few—where people's emotions were high. We had 21 votes for the bill, but 1 of those votes backed away because he wanted to get another bill heard. But because the leadership in the senate refused to take it up, he said, "'Well, I'm not voting for the parent trigger bill.' I mean, that is how sausage is made."

In fact, the trigger should have been a perfect example of interest paid on previous reform investments. "It wasn't as if this was some major radical departure from what people generally want, which is parental involvement," says Bush. "The bill simply said that parents could petition the school district, if their school received an F, to give an advisory opinion about which alternative the district would embrace. That's all."

But it was a big deal to the teachers union and the plaintiffs' bar, the League of Women Voters, even the PTA, all of whom opposed the law. Says Bush: "Only in a Kafka novel and the Florida legislature would the PTA oppose giving parents a voice."

He smiles. It's clear that he enjoys the political arena and is comfortable in the dust stirred up by the struggles. He excuses himself, then rushes off with an aide to shoot a couple of commercials for an education reform group.

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