

MARGARET SPELLINGS

On January 20, 2005, the United States Senate confirmed Margaret Spellings as the 8th U.S. Secretary of Education.

During President Bush's first term, Spellings served as Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, from which she helped craft education policies, including the No Child Left Behind Act. She was also responsible for the development and implementation of White House policy on health, labor, transportation, justice, housing, and other elements of President Bush's domestic agenda.

Prior to her White House appointment, Spellings worked for six years as Governor Bush's Senior Advisor with responsibility for developing and implementing the Governor's education policy. Her work included the Texas Reading Initiative, the Student Success Initiative to eliminate social promotion, and the nation's strongest school assessment and accountability system. She also made recommendations to the Governor for key gubernatorial appointments. Previously, Spellings served as Associate Executive Director of the Texas Association of School Boards.

Born in Michigan in 1957, Spellings moved with her family at a young age to Houston, Texas, where she attended public schools. She graduated from the University of Houston in 1979 with a bachelor's degree in political science and journalism.

As the mother of two school-age daughters, Spellings has a special understanding of the issues facing parents and students today. Her daughter Mary, age 17, attends a parochial high school, and her daughter Grace, age 12, attends a public middle school. Spellings is the first mother of school children to serve as U.S. Secretary of Education.

RAISING ACHIEVEMENT:

A NEW PATH FOR NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

WE HAVE LEARNED A LOT in the three years since the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed—the “early childhood” of this law, if you will. As any mother can tell you, a surprising amount of progress is made in the first three years of life. When you think about it, it is truly amazing how much a child actually learns in the first three years of life: learning how to sit up, crawl, walk, and also to learn an entire language. I often think we do more in those first three years than in the entire rest of our lives.

The law has successfully come through what parents fondly call the “terrible twos”—that time when they and their youngsters learn a lot about themselves and each other, even if they don’t want to. Now, NCLB is entering preschool, where we as the adopted parents—policymakers in education—continue to lay a foundation for continuous improvement and success down the road. Needless to say, as a mother of a tween and a teen, I know that it will be interesting and challenging when our law hits adolescence, but I also know that if we continue to do things right, we will adjust to those years as well.

The course of NCLB has been steady, and I intend to build on it. As former Secretary of Education Rod Paige said, No Child Left Behind was based on “principles, not programs.” The law was a national endorsement of the president’s conviction that “every child matters” and “every child can learn.” It was passed by overwhelming bipartisan majorities in Congress who were tired of seeing students passed along from grade to grade without mastering the material.

So, like going back through a baby book, let me begin by reviewing those simple but revolutionary principles. There are four of them.

First, the law established meaningful accountability. NCLB set up clear expectations. Under the law, states and school districts developed accountability plans to ensure that their schools were reaching and teaching every single child. Within 18 months, all 50 states had done so. Each and every state plan is different, reflecting the uniqueness of each of the states. Instead of having only a handful of states in compliance with the previous law, as was the case when President Bush took office, now, all 50 states have plans and are working to meet the goals set out in them.

Most states did not just follow the letter of the law in their plans—

they embraced its spirit. Virginia, South Carolina, and Wyoming set robust and rigorous Adequate Yearly Progress targets. Massachusetts, Maryland, and Pennsylvania did a great job aligning their assessment systems with the new law—a sometimes tricky business.

The states helped create an environment of high expectations. The goal of the law is to get all children reading and doing math at grade level by the year 2013-14. As Mississippi State Superintendent Henry Johnson said, “If you have high standards, kids will learn what you teach them. The goal is for 100 percent of students to be proficient.”

He’s right. We know that students respond when you give them a chance. A new report by the Center on Education Policy confirms this. It found that at-risk students are being helped much earlier and in a more systematic way, and that students with disabilities are receiving more time and attention in the classroom than before. That is exactly the kind of progress we like to see given that the federal role in education is targeted to those students who historically have been left behind.

The second principle: respect for local control. That’s nothing new—it comes from the United States Constitution. No Child Left Behind was designed not to dictate processes, but to promote innovation and improve results for kids. States and school districts develop the tests and set the achievement targets for students to meet. In other words, the law has set the goal: proficiency for all students by 2013-14. You write the plan for your state and look forward to seeing the results: student achievement. You all are working hard toward that goal, working with each and every student to get him or her there. But educators know, thanks to NCLB, what the goal is—proficiency for all.

The third principle is parental involvement. No Child Left Behind has truly empowered parents with better information and more options. That includes online school report cards, free tutoring under the supplemental services provision of the law, and the choice for parents to move their child to a school more suited to his or her needs if the current school is not meeting those needs.

Today, a number of states have worked hard to promote supplemental services for students. For example, Tennessee and Louisiana have built strong evaluation systems, including measuring for parental satisfaction. And Florida has a thorough and easy-to-use online application process to accredit tutoring providers. The implementation of this provision of the law is founded on the core principle behind the No Child Left Behind Act as a

whole, which is whether all children are learning. We want to encourage innovation without stifling it with red tape.

Finally, the fourth principle is doing what works. Every state does some things well. But we cannot be satisfied with that alone. We are all working too hard not to work smart. The Department of Education is in a good position—and has a responsibility—to evaluate and help replicate successful policies. We want to help states share information and best practices with one another. And what we know that works today will be informed by what we learn from science and will be applied in the classroom tomorrow. We need to continue to use this new knowledge to strengthen our education practices and policies.

A prime example of that principle in action has been the Reading First and Early Reading First programs. Why the focus on reading and reading early? Because if students can’t read, they can’t do much else. Research tells us that if children aren’t reading by the third grade, it is going to be hard for them to catch up—and we know what kind of reading instruction works best. We have a responsibility to foster, share, and fund that knowledge. Reading First and Early Reading First grants are now helping to train nearly 100,000 teachers to teach more than 1.5 million students with effective, scientifically based instructional methods. Many states, including Florida, Michigan, Alabama, West Virginia, and Washington, deserve credit for seamlessly integrating Reading First into their curricula.

Another example concerns teachers—a major focus of NCLB that is tied to doing what works. Again, we know from research that a good teacher is one of the most important factors in whether children learn well.

That’s why the Department has been working with states to give them tools to help improve the quality of their teaching so that, ultimately, students benefit. Our Teacher-to-Teacher roundtables, Research-to-Practice Summits, and summer workshops are helping educators from around the country learn from one another. For example, last spring teachers in Maine participated in a roundtable discussion with the Department. Their input shaped the teacher outreach efforts and support for teachers across America.

Here again we have much to learn from states. Programs like South Carolina’s Teacher Cadet program, Nebraska’s STARS assessment system, and the Mississippi Teacher Center are helping school districts hire, train, and retain the highly qualified teachers our kids so urgently need. Hawaii has been

proactive in addressing the anticipated principal shortage through innovative alternative certification programs for assistant principals and teachers.

Their actions have rewarded the president's confidence that if we set high standards our teachers and students will meet them; if we insist on results, we will see them. And the states are meeting this prime directive.

Today, three years later, nearly every state reports academic improvement. Elementary school students in urban school districts have made "clearly impressive gains," according to Mike Casserly of the Council of the Great City Schools. Students who were once left behind are now leading the way. In every corner of the country—from Massachusetts to Georgia to Illinois to New Mexico—students are learning and the achievement gap is closing. To quote my friend Senator Ted Kennedy, "Research-based instruction, assessments and targeted interventions are working."

We have learned a lot over the last three years as our infant law has matured. Like new parents, we all learn things as we go along and as we get better at parenting. The past three years have helped us be smarter about how this law is working in schools. I have been involved in our public schools for more than two decades in many different ways—at the local, state, and now federal levels. I have been meeting with educators, parents, and policymakers from around the country to get their input. I am also an education consumer: I have two children in school and view policy from the vantage point of a parent as well.

The Department of Education has announced a new program—Raising Achievement: A New Path for No Child Left Behind. It will show us the way forward given what we've learned in the last three years. It will focus on results—raising student achievement and closing the achievement gap. And it is built on the fundamental principles of the No Child Left Behind Act that I have just described.

States that show results and follow the principles of No Child Left Behind will be eligible for new tools to help them meet the law's goal of getting every child to grade level by 2013-14. It's a shared responsibility.

Think of this new policy as a new equation: the principles of the law such as annual testing and reporting of subgroup data, plus student achievement and a narrowing of the achievement gap, plus overall sound state education policies, equals a new, commonsense approach to implementation of No Child Left Behind.

Let me explain in detail what I mean about each of

those three parts of the equation and, when you add them together, what it all means for the states.

First, follow the principles of the law. There are certain "bright lines" in this statute. One is assessing all students every year from grades three through eight—not every other year or every other class, but every year. Another is reporting results by student subgroup so that we can identify those students most at risk of being left behind—children with disabilities, the economically disadvantaged, minority students, and English learners. And another is working to improve the quality of teachers in the profession and removing barriers to entry for those who are qualified. And the last is making a good faith effort to reach out to parents, with easy-to-access information about their schools and frequent notices of their school transfer choices and tutoring options.

Second, ensure that students are learning. Is your state's overall achievement going up—are the trend lines going in the right direction? Are schools in your community closing the achievement gap? Are they raising graduation rates and lowering dropout levels? How well is your state using student achievement information? Are students reading on grade level by the end of the third grade? Do your schools have strong plans in place to meet their 2013-14 proficiency targets? Is your state improving students' preparation for college?

Third, have sound state education policies. Some examples include:

- Choosing policies that go above and beyond current law, such as assessing students annually in at least three high school grades, as Texas, California, and Colorado do.
- Providing comprehensive Web-based tools to align curricula, instruction and funding, making life easier for educators and administrators—as Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Kansas are doing.
- Using the Department of Education's Teacher-to-Teacher e-Learning courses for credit toward recertification and training requirements. Thirty-two states are taking part. The program is free—which I know states will appreciate.
- Partnering with universities or the business community to develop creative ways to close the achievement gap, such as programs that strive to give students challenging coursework to better prepare

them for life after K-12, whether in the workforce or college.

- Harnessing the power of technology. Vermont is creating an electronic database of student and school statistics.
- It can even mean partnering with other countries! For example, Utah has partnered with Mexico to help ensure that migrant students receive consistent educational experiences in both countries.

In other words, it is the results that truly matter, not the bureaucratic way that you get there. That's just common sense, sometimes lost in the halls of the government.

This is a comprehensive approach to the implementation of this law. States seeking additional flexibility will get credit for the work they have done to reform their education system as a whole. The first example of this new flexibility—this workable, sensible approach—concerns students with cognitive disabilities.

Scientific research over the past three years has shown that some students with persistent academic disabilities can make substantial progress toward grade-level achievement, given the right instruction and more time. It is estimated that about 2 percent of all students may fit this description.

Under this policy, students with academic disabilities will be allowed to take tests that are specifically geared toward their abilities, as long as the state is working to best serve those students by providing rigorous research-based training for teachers, improving assessments, and organizing collaboration between special education and classroom teachers. If states stand up for the kids and provide better instruction and assessment, we will stand by them. This policy builds on current regulations, which allow states to give students with the most significant cognitive disabilities—up to 1 percent of them—alternate tests based on alternate achievement standards. This new approach recognizes that children should not all be treated alike. By relying on the most current and accurate information on how children learn and how to best serve their academic needs, this new policy focuses on children. They continue to be included in the accountability system because we know that, otherwise, they risk being ignored, as was often the case before NCLB.

To institute this change, the Department will direct \$14 million in immediate support for these

kids. We're developing a comprehensive tool kit based on the best research from the Institute of Education Sciences and the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development to help states identify and assess students with disabilities. This is a new and exciting approach that makes academic achievement the top priority.

Critically, we are targeting our technical assistance resources to ensure that states develop and implement reliable and valid assessments, as Kansas has done, in order to guide effective instruction and hold everyone accountable for results. No doubt we all have a lot to learn from states like Massachusetts to better serve all children with the most rigorous assessments and the most effective instruction. But I stand committed to making sure that states are provided with the best information and technical assistance possible so that no child is left behind.

This is a new day. A day when student achievement is front and center in all our efforts. A day when classroom teachers and special educators are provided the critical information they need to work together in making sure all students achieve. And a day, for the first time in education, in which the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services are collaborating and linking their programs together so that all teachers—classroom teachers and special educators—establish a partnership and a common language about how best to assess the education needs of their students and work hand-in-hand to address these needs.

As we continue to watch this law grow and mature, we will address other concerns—again, as long as the children are learning. Ultimately, that is the mission of this law. We are in the process of convening a working group to find appropriate ways that growth models—ways to capture individual student progress from year to year—might be used to measure academic achievement. As we have done with this special education policy, we will convene expert researchers and leading practitioners on this topic. We are open to suggestions on how we can better understand how a state can use a growth model to meet the guiding principles of NCLB.

Many states have their own particular issues. In short, we are willing to consider requests, as long as the results for students are there and the principles of the law are followed—what I often refer to as the “bright lines” of the statute. In our opinion, using a workable, flexible approach by looking at academic achievement first is the way it should be. That, after all, is the purpose of the No Child Left

Behind Act, with a focus on closing the achievement gap in particular. As my good friend John Boehner said when this law was signed, "We as a society and we as a country cannot continue to exist unless we close that gap." Chairman Boehner helped lead the way and is a true education reformer committed to staying the course.

States that understand this new way of doing things will be gratified. It makes sense, plain and simple. Others looking for loopholes to simply take the federal funds, ignore the intent of the law, and have minimal results to show for their millions of federal dollars, will think otherwise and be disappointed.

Above all, on this new path, we're going to let research and results drive our decisions. We want to help all states provide for the best instruction possible. So we're counting on advocacy groups like the members of the Learning First Alliance, who deserve a great deal of credit for spotlighting the examples of high-poverty districts that have succeeded in raising student achievement. There's an entire world of knowledge to tap into—from the reading strategies of the American Federation of Teachers to research-based early childhood development programs.

The equation of the law's principles, plus student achievement, plus sound educational policies, equals a new, common sense approach and is designed to help people where they live. I've been at the state level, working with a governor to reform public education in the state of Texas. We did plenty of heavy lifting at a time when the pressure to stick with the status quo was intense.

Times have changed. A spirit of reform and renewal now governs public education in America. It's a spirit that, like America, looks forward, not back. "Education should not be static or stagnant," Maryland State Superintendent Nancy Grasmick has said. "It should be dynamic." And this plan is.

All the states have one thing in common: they care about their children and their futures. They recognize that student achievement comes first. And they are invaluable partners to our effort. Kati Haycock of the Education Trust speaks for many of us in the education field when she says, "These results are too promising to abandon this approach now." I agree. Let's go down this new path together. I believe it points the way to a more hopeful future for our children and our nation that truly leaves no child behind.

LBJ