

Educ
Testimony

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: BRUCE REED
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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON NATIONAL TESTS

This memo outlines the current status of the national testing initiative in Congress, and our strategy for winning the fight to keep the initiative on track.

I. Current Status and Recent Developments

The conferees have begun to meet, but are not expected to take up the testing issue until many other issues are addressed. We have two distinct objectives in conference: (1) securing an authorization along the lines of the Senate provision, permitting tests to proceed under NAGB's auspices, and (2) ensuring that the bill provides the \$16 million needed for continued test development.

For the most part, House Appropriations Committee members have argued that resolving this issue will require reaching an agreement with Goodling. By all accounts, Goodling is firmly locked into his position with the strong support of the House leadership. Last Friday he sent you a letter implying that he will not move an America Reads bill as long as you continue to press for the tests.

In a staff-level discussion, the only idea floated by Republican staff was to proceed with test development, but require separate authorization for test implementation. We do not think that is a good deal for us.

Conservative Republican Senators who supported the Coats/NAGB compromise have come under strong pressure from the Eagle Forum, and 14 of the 42 Republicans who voted for the Coats amendment switched sides last week and signed a letter written by Ashcroft, threatening to filibuster the appropriations bill if it does not contain Goodling's prohibition on the tests. We are relying on business groups and Finn and Bennett to hold as many Republicans as possible. Senate Democratic support is holding firm. Last week, 43 Democratic Senators signed a letter written by Bingaman, threatening a filibuster if the conference report does not let your testing initiative go forward.

In the House, securing Republican support for something along the lines of the Senate provision is key. Staff of the Department of Education and DPC have reached out to moderate Republicans,

including Mike Castle, who spoke in favor of the Senate provision on the floor and has previously served on NAGB.

We anticipate that any compromise will need to modify the Senate provision at least somewhat, and we are working with the Education Department to prepare proposals that we can support. These might include language that prohibits the Education Department from developing national curriculum in reading and math, or that delays full test implementation for a year, while providing for a field test in interested states and districts in 1999.

In addition, we continue to explore ways of reducing the opposition from the Black and Hispanic Caucuses, though securing their support alone will not substantially advance our cause. Secretary Riley has met with the three members of the CBC who opposed the Goodling amendment -- Chaka-Fattah, Al Wynn, and Harold Ford -- to seek their advice on how best to secure the support of the Black Caucus. They noted that the primary concern of caucus members is school construction, and that members feel strongly that we have failed to fight sufficiently hard for this initiative. There are two school construction tax-credit proposals likely to be introduced in Congress in the near future, both as alternatives to Coverdell-like provisions to provide IRA tax-free withdrawals for K-12 education.

One will be offered by Rangel in a Ways and Means mark-up, and the other by Daschle if Coverdell offers his proposal in the Senate. We believe that it will be helpful for us to endorse at least one of these proposals if they begin to move in Congress.

We also have been working closely with the Council of Great City Schools to explore commercially available 4th grade reading tests in Spanish that are aligned to NAEP frameworks and performance standards. At least one such test is already available -- essentially the equivalent of a Spanish-language version of the national reading test. Our strategy is for the Great City Schools and the local superintendents to take the lead in persuading the Hispanic groups and the Hispanic Caucus that this test provides what they have been asking for. We then would help ensure that these tests could be administered and reported in coordination with the national tests, and be prepared to support paying for their administration through Title I.

The work on test development has been proceeding over the last several weeks. The test specifications that would provide the blueprint for test development were completed, and new advisory committees organized by the test development contractor began to meet.

For a number of reasons, these developments were greeted with some alarm by key Republicans in the Congress (e.g., Coats, Specter, and Riggs) and elsewhere (e.g., Finn, Ravitch, Bennett and Engler), especially a provision in the test specifications permitting students to answer all test questions with the aid of a calculator. At our urging, Secretary Riley issued a statement criticizing the calculator decision, urging NAGB to reverse the decision.

II. Communications

Our overall approach over the coming weeks is to convince the Republicans that they are fighting a losing battle by opposing us again on education issues. We will highlight the national tests as the centerpiece of your campaign to improve public education through a comprehensive strategy of promoting higher standards and greater accountability; increasing parental involvement and public school choice through charter schools; and investing in improved teaching and learning, including technology programs. We will cast our opponents as trying to undermine improvements in public education by blocking the tests and pushing for block grants that will end important programs and cut investments.

We will wage a continuing, high profile campaign over the next few weeks, with the following events being planned:

- The Vice President's release of an Education Department Study on the importance of father's involvement in education on Thursday.
- A visible, high-tech business leaders effort, which you will kick off at a White House meeting with John Doerr, James Barksdale and other high-tech CEO's on October 8, followed by a public statement prior to your departure to New Jersey.
- A meeting the week of October 20 with the newly formed Learning Alliance for public education, a consortium of 12 national organizations involved in K-12 education working to promote a standards-based reform agenda at the local level.
- If schedule permits, the Vice President's participation in a joint meeting of the Council of Great City Schools and U.S. Conference of Mayors on October 15-18, where an additional 4-5 cities would announce their participation in the tests.
- One or more background briefings on public education for selected press by the Vice President or First Lady and Secretary Riley.
- Release of a Department of Education report that says students who take algebra and other advanced math courses are far more likely to go on to college, along with the release of a Department of Education/National Science Foundation math directive action plan.
- Announcement of a new plan for recycling surplus federal computers to schools.
- Continued efforts by Secretary Riley, Deputy Secretary Smith, White House staff, and other Cabinet members to talk to editorial boards, Sunday shows, and talk radio in key states and congressional districts.

- A congressional recess strategy in targeted districts, with aggressive efforts by surrogates while you're out of the country.

III. Outreach

Education Department and DPC staff meet weekly with education and business groups that support the tests to share information and coordinate strategy. We also have worked closely with other business leaders and groups, including Lou Gerstner and John Doerr. As a result, we have learned that:

- A number of business leaders are considering buying ads in support of the tests.
- Lou Gerstner is trying to secure an endorsement for the tests by ACHIEVE. The six CEO's on the Board and four of the Governors (Engler, Romer, Hunt and Miller) are supportive; Voinovich and Thompson have not yet agreed.
- John Doerr has written to governors and state education officials, as well as big city education leaders, thanking those who have signed up for the tests and urging others to join.
- Business and education groups alike have sent alerts to their grass roots membership urging them to contact their Congressional delegations and promote the testing initiative in the press.

The Office of Intergovernmental Affairs has worked regularly to shore up the Governors and Mayors already participating in the tests and keep them apprised of the Congressional battle and Intergovernmental also is reaching out to additional state and local elected officials.

Education Department and DPC staff continue to meet with civil rights groups in an ongoing effort to respond to their concerns and to educate them about the implications of placing NAGB in charge of the tests.

We also have been in close contact with Checker Finn and Diane Ravitch, urging them, together with Bill Bennett and John Engler, to work to maintain Republican support in the Senate and help find a toehold in the House.