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REPUBLICANS TALK: The History of the Education Plank

Talking About Education Policy -- But Will They Do Anything?

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Monday night of the Republican National Convention was momentous. Though the usual Republican policy proposal, tax cuts, was raised, it received far less lip service than the subject of education. "Leave no child behind" is the theme of the GOP event, and in large part, this means pushing for improved education for children. Members of the KIPP Academy (Knowledge Is Power Program, a Houston charter school for underprivileged children) were trotted out, as was Governor Bush's teacher/librarian wife, Laura, to make the case to America that the Republicans are serious about giving children the best education possible.

In the past, neither party has been particularly serious about making education policy. Indeed, in 1996 the Republican platform called for the abolition of the U.S. Department of Education. Education wasn't even mentioned as a subject in either party's platform until the late 19th century -- which is peculiar.

When we look at the speeches and writings of early leading lights in America, like George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Noah Webster, and others, we find myriad arguments in favor of educating the populace. Education could enable a person to reason and rise above barbarity; education was the means to inculcate virtue; education empowered one to understand what was best for him, or at least see how best to achieve his ends, and so forth. Education, in short, was conducive to happiness. Widespread ignorance, on the other hand, was grist for demagogues and made for mobocracy. Clearly, if hereditary kingship was to be replaced with free men choosing their rulers, said citizens had better be learned enough to recognize the charlatans from the competent.

Nevertheless, parties were mum on the subject and almost no federal education policy was made. In 1876, the silence was broken. The Republican platform declared that "the public schools system of the several states is the bulwark of the American public," and then called for the amendment of the

Constitution so that no state monies would flow into non-public or sectarian schools. This wasn't a high-minded stand on the separation of church and state; rather, it was bigotry, directed against Catholics, who had been emigrating to America's shores en masse and grousing, rightfully, that their children were forced to read the King James Bible in public schools. If public monies would support Protestant education, why not give some to Catholic church schools for Catholic education? Isn't this what pluralism is all about? The Democratic party responded by dismissing the proposal as a "false issue with which they enkindle sectarian strife."

The subject of education soon disappeared from both party's platforms and did not appear until 1916 and 1920, when calls for funding for vocational education were raised, first by Republicans, then by Democrats. Over the next seventy years, the topic was raised sporadically. While party platforms gave great lip service to the value of education, what few proposals for education policy were raised sought to create small, targeted programs, aiming at "under-served" portions of the population, such as American Indians, the blind, and the poor. While democratic theory might oblige an educated populace, paradoxically, the parties didn't see reason to advocate policy to that end. It was the politics of exhortation -- yay for education, boo for federal education policy.

In fact, often the mere possibility of federal education policy to benefit all American children was pilloried, sometime explicitly, sometimes implicitly. Though public education, as an early Republican platform exhorted, was "the only safe basis of popular suffrage ... and nursery of good government," the federal government should steer clear of the business of educating American youth. As the Democratic platform argued in 1924, the federal government must only offer to the states "such counsel, advice and aid as may be made available through the federal agencies for the general improvement of our schools in view of our national needs." In 1964, Republicans sounded a similar note, their platform declaring, "We pledge ... to continue the advancement of education on all levels ... while resisting the Democratic efforts which endanger local control of schools." Local control, and the specter of federal tyranny -- these have been the arguments most frequently used to derail education proposals.

In 1992, both parties made history. President Bush, who sought to be the "education president," was able to get a plank in the Republican platform calling for national standards for education, the purpose of which would be to raise educational achievement for all children. Democrats responded in kind with their own standards proposal, and upon defeating Bush, their leader, Bill Clinton, not long thereafter hatched his Goals 2000 education proposal.

While Bush's America 2000 education bill was scuttled by a rancorous Democratic Congress, Clinton was able to get his Goals 2000 standards bill made into law. To do so, though, he had to defang the policy, leaving little more than oratory that dished out federal dollars but didn't require states to show that they had actually raised standards or improved achievement. Congressional Democrats had protested that school funding inequities made raising standards unfair to poor and minority children, who, they presumed, were incapable of meeting higher educational standards. Republicans, meanwhile, conjured up the specter of a national school board, lording over the localities and ramming leftist dogma down children's throats. In the end, Goals 2000 essentially provided that so long as states showed that they were making progress toward creating reform plans that would raise educational standards, they could continue to feed at the Goals 2000 trough.

Over two centuries have passed since this nation was founded. In that time, the leading lights in politics have exhorted the importance of an educated public. Thus far, forty some presidents and over one hundred Congresses have made precious little policy toward that end.

No doubt the Democrats will also toot the education horn at their convention. Both parties, it seems, are engaging in a kind of education policy one-upmanship. Whoever wins the general election, one can only wonder, will they be able to overcome history? Or will the politics of exhortation live on?

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