

Governor Jindal's Address to At Brookings' Improving Educational Choice and Competition Event

Thank you, thank you for your very kind and appropriately exaggerated remarks.

As I was thinking about what to say here today...a thought occurred to me...maybe I should say some things that are not allowed to be said in public, maybe I should say some things that folks think about but are afraid to say in polite company.

And by the way, if you ever want to get the attention of your staffers, and get them to stop playing with their iPhones in a meeting, this is the way to do it. Threaten to tell the truth out in public and they will start to pay very close attention to what you are saying.

So here goes. I will talk later about what we have been doing in New Orleans and now in the whole state as well, but first two scandalous observations for you.

First – The United States of America does not provide equal opportunity in education.

Let that sink in for a minute. Again, America does not provide equal opportunity in education.

Yes, we are the land of the free and the home of the brave. You can all take solace in that. But do not lay your head on the pillow at night believing that America provides equal opportunity in education. We do not.

I will grant you that the original goal of public education in America was to provide a quality education for every child, regardless of circumstances, income, zip code, race, religion, or any other factors. And I would suggest that this worked pretty well for a long period of time.

And I even appreciate the nostalgic view that many folks take toward public education in America...the notion that it is fair, that it gives the disadvantaged and the downtrodden a chance, an opportunity in life that they otherwise would not have had.

With public education, it's not just the sons and daughter of the Nobles who can be educated, the children of the Serfs can be educated as well. And I will be the first to admit that this was once true.

But it is completely dishonest to pretend today that America provides equal opportunity in education. We do not. And if you say that we do, you are lying. I would try to be more direct, but I don't know how.

If you are a low income parent residing in an urban area in America, it is more likely than not your child attends a failing school. And, unless you are fortunate enough to live in New Orleans, or Milwaukee, or Cleveland, you have no options, no recourse.

You do not have the resources to enroll your child in a non-public school that is performing well, and you do not have the resources to move your family to an area with higher performing public schools. This is fact.

My second scandalous observation is this -- There is one entity that is working hard every day, spending millions of dollars every year, to make sure that you do not ever get the opportunity to get your child out of that failing school and into a different school.

That entity is the teachers union. And that, my friends, is shameful.

Were it not for the teachers unions' herculean efforts, every low income family would have the opportunity to enroll their children into a better performing school, a school that meets the unique needs of their kids.

This is not an opinion. This is a fact. And it is a fact that the teachers union officials will not deny, in fact they brag about it. They alone are stopping school choice from occurring in all across of the country.

Now, to be fair, I believe that the great majority of teachers in this country have very pure motives. And I've found teachers to be far more giving and compassionate and well intentioned than the folks who populate most professions.

And truth be told, our country would be royally off the rails without these people. And furthermore, I believe that we terribly undervalue teachers in this country, and we demonstrate that by how we pay them all the same, and by how we jam them into a statist system which places little value on quality and supreme value on longevity.

It's way past time for the rank and file teachers to peel the scales off of their eyes and realize that teachers' unions exist for their own benefit, not the benefit of teachers. It's time to look at what their union is doing and put an end to it. It's time to bring American education out of the Stone Age and into the 21st century, a place where our choices are dramatically expanding, and a place where the old centralized government model is increasingly outdated and inefficient.

I'll have more to say along these lines at the end of my remarks, but now that I have hopefully gotten your attention, let me turn to the situation in Louisiana and New Orleans specifically.

Before I get into the details about what we did in Louisiana to reform our education system, I want to start with a story that has stuck in my mind for almost ten years.

Back in 2003, I read a newspaper article about the valedictorian of a high school in New Orleans who wouldn't be able to attend her graduation ceremony.

She had terrific grades and had won the honor of being valedictorian her class—the problem was she hadn't passed the 10th grade Graduate Exit Exam, after taking it five times, and she had only scored an 11 on the ACT. That's seven points below the score at which the ACT requires college remediation.

New Orleans was a traditional district with school attendance zones that assigned students to school based on their zip code, had an onerous and restrictive collective bargaining agreement with the local teachers' union, and 77 percent of students attended a failing school.

That same year, the Recovery School District was created.

A statewide, state-run district, its purpose was to take over schools after four years of failing and turn them around.

At the time, no one knew how important it would be to reform in New Orleans—or how it would inspire reform statewide. Five schools in New Orleans were transferred over to the RSD in those first few years.

Fast forward to 2005 – Hurricanes Katrina and Rita decimated the city and the school infrastructure.

Out of necessity, the Legislature convened an emergency session in the fall of 2005 and handed 107 low-performing schools in the city over to the RSD.

But then the dog caught the car and the state quickly realized it could not do this alone.

The Orleans Parish School Board was not functioning. Most of the buildings were severely damaged. There were no basic supplies, like pencils and paper. We needed help, badly. We needed problem solvers, innovators, leaders to come in and run some of these schools and turn them around. And they came, from inside and outside the system, from the 9th Ward and across the country.

In fact, if you talk to some of the biggest proponents of the RSD today, they're the veteran teachers and principals who taught in the system before the storm.

Take Sharon Clark, principal of Sophie B. Wright Charter School in New Orleans. She's been the principal since 2001. Before the storm, when she needed pens for her students, she had to hammer the district for months. She'd call and call and call the central office, but no pens would show up.

With that kind of bureaucracy, it was no wonder only 20 percent of students were on grade level. How do you focus on educating kids when the central office is distracting you with all sorts of nonsense?

In 2005, the school was converted to a charter. Sharon was skeptical of this “new” model that exchanged autonomy for accountability. But ask her today what she would do if Sophie B. Wright weren't an RSD charter and she'll reply “find another profession.”

That's because when she needs pens now, she walks down the street to Staples and she buys some—and 54 percent of students at the school are on grade level.

But it wasn't enough. Despite the gains we'd made, we'd started from such low standards and achievement levels; we were losing a generation of students. Public schools were improving—at rates that defied imagination—but still too many students were not on grade level.

Yet sitting next to them were terrific private ones that students couldn't afford to attend. So we turned again to folks outside the “traditional” public education world in 2008: we created the New Orleans Scholarship Program.

Why wouldn't we give them the choice—with their parents' own tax dollars after all—to pick the better option next door? These students had no time to lose. They only had one chance at a great education.

That first year 600 students enrolled in a private school on a scholarship.

Today, there are 86 public schools currently open in New Orleans, serving approximately 38,000 students, and 43 private schools in and around the city in the Scholarship Program serving nearly 3,000.

For Valerie Evans, the Scholarship Program totally changed everything for her son Gabriel. Returning after the storm, Gabriel was way behind academically. He had essentially missed an entire year of school after the storm. Returning home, he was being bullied in the traditional New Orleans public school where he was enrolled.

According to Valerie, “He used to cry not to go to school.” When a volunteer came and knocked on her door in the summer of 2008, she eagerly applied for a scholarship and Gabriel got a spot at Resurrection of Our Lord Elementary in third grade. “I couldn’t send him back to that dangerous environment he’d been in where he wasn’t catching up academically and he was coming home crying,” she explains.

Now age 11, Gabriel is happy, well-adjusted, and on track to enter a college preparatory program and then college. If Valerie had her way, every parent would have the opportunity to make the same choice she did.

In 2012, parents in New Orleans do. And the results speak for themselves.

With 78 percent of students enrolled in charters, only 29 percent of students are in a failing school, even while we’ve raised academic standards statewide. In 2005, 77 percent New Orleans students attended a failing school.

Since 2007, the percentage of students in New Orleans that are reading and doing math at grade level has more than doubled.

You’d never have thought before the storm that we’d be here today to recognize New Orleans as the number one ranked school district on the Brookings Choice and Competition Index. As Russ mentioned earlier, it is the first and only district to receive a grade of A on for its competitive environment.

And truly, New Orleans is the highest standard of choice; no child is stuck in the school that happens to be in their zip code, no child is priced out of a better private option, and student achievement is on the rise.

The bottom line is that there is no such thing as a quality monopoly.

Quality is driven by competition, accountability and autonomy. Let providers compete, hold them accountable for outcomes, but get out of the way and let teachers and school leaders do their jobs. Let me tell you a little bit about how it works:

Students apply to a single, central enrollment system that includes schools city wide: Orleans Parish School Board schools, RSD schools, the Scholarship program schools, locally authorized charter schools and state authorized charter schools.

The student ranks his school choices, public or private, all in one application—and he’s placed by a lottery that prioritizes above all the school he ranked as his top choice. There is no “Default” option.

Even a parent who wants the local neighborhood school down the block, the one the old attendance zones would have picked for her child, must choose it.

The bottom line is we got over ourselves: The “government” doesn’t have a monopoly on education. In fact, it doesn’t matter who runs the school or who oversees it, if it’s offering a high quality education, a student can choose it and we will pay for them to do so.

Dollars follow that child to the school he chooses, while parents receive transparent, easy to understand information about school performance to help them choose wisely.

Again – the results speak for themselves.

Between 2008 and 2012, the RSD in New Orleans had the highest growth of any district in the state—a nearly 50 percent increase—and in 2012 the Orleans Parish School Board got an A with the second highest performance in the state.

The Scholarship Schools are showing significantly more growth since 2008 than schools statewide. While the state grew two points in the percentage of proficient third graders in math, the scholarship program grew twenty-three percentage points. And while the state grew three points in the percentage of proficient third graders in English, the scholarship program students grew twelve percentage points.

The RSD is the model—next it was time to give this choice to every parent in the state.

We knew we had a lot of quality providers already in Louisiana—traditional public schools, charter schools, private schools, virtual schools, colleges offering dual enrollment, and business and industry offering technical training.

In 2009 we removed the cap on charter schools. This year, 104 charter schools are educating nearly 57,000 students in Louisiana and just this last year, charter schools outpaced district schools in raising student achievement: 6.14 points vs. 4.7 points of growth.

Over the last five years, we’ve also added nearly 1,000 seats at the Louisiana Virtual School and 20 additional course offerings.

As a result, we were able to expand Advanced Placement courses to every parish and today every district is required to offer at least one AP course. The research agrees: AP improves college achievement.

For example, University of Texas researchers concluded that students who take AP courses in high school are more likely to graduate from college within four years and have higher grade point averages in college than similar students who did not take AP courses.

And in 2011 we created the ultimate tool to empower parents: we translated school performance into letter grades. No longer could we hide how many failing schools we have.

But the different choices weren’t easy to use. They had different funding streams and different application processes. It was hard for parents to know which choices they had or to access them.

So, we passed legislation last spring that turned our various choices into a system by doing five things:

First, we expanded the Scholarship Program to all 64 parishes in Louisiana for low income students.

Louisiana has one of the highest private school attendance rates in the country yet the poorest students were priced out of this option.

Now any student at a C, D, or F rated school can attend the private school of his choice.

117 private schools signed up this year and still demand exceeded supply: 10,000 students applied for 5,000 spots.

The number of scholarships awarded this year because of our reforms increased by 250 percent over 2011-2012.

And we hold scholarship schools accountable for getting the job done: Scholarship students take state tests, and those results are reported each year.

For scholarship students, schools receive a Scholarship Cohort Index—a calculation not unlike the public schools' School Performance Score—that gives parents a clear picture of how Scholarship students at that school are doing.

If the scholarship school receives a score of 50 or below on a scale of 150—the same “failing” bar for public schools whose SPS is also calculated on a 150 point scale—after two years of participating, we won't give them any more students until they can demonstrate they can handle the ones they have.

Multiple years of a 50, we may kick them out of the program permanently, unless they are making significant growth—or the public schools the students would otherwise be attending are lower performing.

Second, we created new pathways to become a charter school.

Before this legislation, there was only one way to become a charter school; operators had to apply one school at a time, pushing paper instead of quality; and local leaders didn't have a way to help expand charters in their communities, especially in Northern Louisiana, many hours from Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Now, applicants in D and F districts can go straight to the state board.

Charters with track records in other states can get credit for that performance.

High performing charters can receive performance-based approval for more than one school in the same application cycle—where the opening of the second school is based on the successful performance of the first school, the third school on the performance of the first two, and so on—to achieve economies of scale for operators.

We also created a new kind of authorizer to empower local communities to engage in charter schools—but keep the level of quality and accountability that we see with state authorized schools by letting our state board create local “franchises” of itself.

The state board will approve in a charter-like process an interested and well established nonprofit or university that has the capacity, controls, and wherewithal to authorize charter schools. We had to deal with reality: charters were not going to expand in Northern Louisiana unless we engaged the communities to invest in the schools themselves.

But we set the bar high: if after four years, the schools this entity authorized were on average rated a D or F, the state would come take them over and the organization would lose its certification to open any more. If they were on average rated C, the entity would be prohibited from opening any more until performance improved.

We also created the Business-Charter Partnership to provide incentives for a business or group of businesses to participate in the development of high quality charter schools.

This partnership is a benefit for economic development and public education in three ways: it empowers communities looking for a way to attract businesses to their parishes; it gives school districts, which can also authorize charter schools, a way to involve the business community in public education; and it provides charter schools a new tool to address facility concerns.

Third, we created choice not only on the school level, but at the course level.

These new “course providers” are universities, virtual providers, or even business and industry that apply to our state board like charter schools do to be approved to offer coursework for credit.

Before, organizations like Associated Builders and Contractors would offer nationally accredited welding classes after hours on high school campuses, but students couldn’t get Louisiana credit for them. They’d have to take a second, typically lower quality welding class during the “school day.”

Students who lived in rural districts that didn’t have the resources to hire an AP biology teacher were stuck: students in those districts just didn’t have access to that kind of advanced coursework.

With course choice, we created a way for quality nontraditional providers to offer advanced, technical, and virtual content during the school day, for school credit, across the state.

And we implemented a pay for performance market based model: The course provider sets its own tuition, up to a cap worth 1/6 of 90 percent of the per student amount. If they want to be competitive, they can charge 1/7 or 1/8—or even lower. That means for the same dollars, we can offer more education.

But the student has to finish the class. The provider gets 50 percent up front—and 50 percent when the student finishes the course. Prioritizing completion, if they can get the student to reenroll after dropping out, they’ll get 40 percent—and the district 10 percent as an incentive to keep the library open after hours or give the student more flexibility on his course schedule to make it happen.

Fourth, we gave parents a way to speed up reform by creating a parent trigger that would authorize transfer to the RSD after three years instead of four years of failing with a petition to the state board

from a majority of parents. It also gave this authority to parents at D or F schools, not just F schools under the old RSD rules.

Parents should be able to trigger change, not have to move to another town or pay for private school to see reform in their local school.

BUT there was one reform that was critical – we changed how we funded all this.

Instead of a disjointed system where all these choices were siloed, confusing to access, and funded by different funding streams in a complex web of government dollars, we said:

First, all of this should be in our state funding formula.

Second, dollars should follow the child.

Third, superintendents and principals should have control over the biggest cost driver of district budgets: personnel.

Historically in Louisiana—and in every state—K-12 education spending is considered an entitlement to school districts. They think it's "their" money.

It's not "their" money—it's taxpayers' money. It's the money of the single mom who wants better for her son in a private school. It's the money of the parents with the talented science student who wants to take AP courses. It's the money of grandmother who wants to make sure her special education grandbaby gets the services she needs.

The teachers' unions wouldn't stand for this.

They sued us, saying that our state funding formula was for only "public" schools. I'll leave the legal arguments to the lawyers, but I thought the Wall Street Journal put it best.

They said the judge conceded that scholarships "are intended to help students escape awful schools but he said this 'ignores the good of the individual students who are left behind in those schools deemed underperforming.'"

"In other words," as the editorial board of the Journal wrote, "better that all students fail together, rather than let parents take the money that is supposed to go to public education and try to get their child actually educated."

The Wall Street Journal said "This is the kind of perverse egalitarianism promoted by the teachers unions that brought the lawsuit."

I couldn't agree more. My job is to make sure that every child has the opportunity to get a great education. We are taking our fight to the state Supreme Court and I'm confident that we will prevail.

How do you do this? Three ways:

First – pay for what you want. We don't want D and F schools. We want quality education, whether that's in a public, charter, private, or virtual school, whether it's gotten all at one place or a couple of places, and regardless of where that child happens to live.

Second – open the market to innovation. Education reform is hard and we should be inviting anyone who can help us get the job done to the table, not sticking to traditional definitions of what a “school” looks like and who can be “teachers.” If you can demonstrate you can get the job done, then we want you in our system.

Third – put reform in the system not on top of it. Reform is not an add-on. If you want structural change, you have to stick what you want into the structure. Stop funding charter schools and scholarships ON TOP of the “traditional” system. Start funding the whole system of choice and empower parents to really vote with their feet, without having to sell their house or pay for private school.

Ironically, federally funding hasn’t gotten the memo. While Louisiana is funding children with a portable, flexible financial backpack, the big entitlement programs like Title I and IDEA are still funding programs and buildings. Federal dollars need an update to fund children not concrete.

We can’t manage schools from Washington, or Baton Rouge, and we shouldn’t try. We need to empower the people closest to students and have dollars follow the child to the choice that’s right for him.

The bottom line is that these reforms work for students. Here are just a few facts.

In 2009-2010, 50 percent of our schools would have been considered a D or F and in 2011-2012, 36 percent of schools are now receiving a D or F.

The number of schools earning an A rose from 98 in October 2011 to 163 in October 2012 – a 66 percent increase.

Louisiana's cohort dropout rate has decreased from 17 percent to 14.6 percent between 2010 and 2011.

The cohort dropout rate represents a four-point decrease since 2008, when the rate was 18.6 percent.

We have more work to do, but we are headed in the right direction.

As I conclude this speech, I want to be certain that I leave no ambiguity with regard to where I stand.

I do not accept the notion that that equal opportunity in education should be a partisan issue.

Oh yes, having served a few years in Congress I fully realize that in the realm of politics everything at one time or another becomes a partisan issue. Such is the nature of our competitive system of government. And it is completely legitimate to note that the two parties have some differing views with regard to education policy. I’m sure it will be forever thus.

But partisan issues tend to never get resolved and America cannot afford to leave these matters unresolved. It is no overstatement to state that the future health of our nation rests on it.

But there are some issues which are not partisan at all, things that nearly all Americans agree on. For example:

We need a military that is strong enough to defend us against those who wish to do us harm, not a partisan issue, a consensus issue.

We needed to rid the world of Bin Laden. That was not a partisan position, but rather a consensus viewpoint.

We need a federal highway system. Again, not a partisan issue, most everyone agrees.

These issues are consensus issues. I believe that equal opportunity in education, made real by school choice, should be a similarly nonpartisan, consensus issue. Oh sure, there will always be debate over the specifics, but the basic principle should really not be contentious at all.

Do we really even need to argue about whether our current antiquated system is working? I see no need to drag you through the statistics showing America's slide in comparison to other industrialized nations, you are all too familiar with the data.

Neither should equal opportunity in education be considered an ideological issue. Very many people who call themselves ideological liberals agree with me on this issue. Or, if you prefer, I agree with them on this issue. Either way is fine with me. Equal opportunity in education should not be a conservative position, or a liberal position, it's an American position.

The ultimate irony here is this -- The people who are in charge of our education system...these are people you would hope, or think, or want to believe are themselves capable of critical thought, of change, of learning, of adapting. This is not hard. It's simple math. We are losing ground. We must adapt. We must change. We have to.

How can it be that America, the country with the greatest higher education opportunities in the entire world, the country that houses the universities that educate the world, can be so stuck in the Stone Age when it comes to pre-K-12 education?

It seems almost laughable, and it would be were it not for the seriousness of the situation. The old way, the centralized government way, is just not relevant to the modern world, the media age, the social media age, the internet age, the technology age.

That's where we are now. The old top down way does not work anymore. We must move to a bottom up, organic way of operating, and education is the tip of the spear.

I'd like to leave you with three hard truths that must be faced up to sooner or later –

First – To oppose school choice is to choose an old antiquated centralized approach that is not working and has no relevance to the modern digital age.

Second – To oppose school choice is to put the wishes of the adults who control the status quo ahead of the needs of children.

Third – To oppose school choice is to oppose equal opportunity for poor and disadvantaged kids in America.

It is my sincere hope that what we are now putting in motion in Louisiana can be done across the country. In which case many lives will be transformed, many futures will be realized, and the results for our country will be real and lasting.

Thank you all for having me, thanks to the Brookings Institution and all that you do.

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