

Federal News Weekly Summary

EDUCATION

RILEY DEFENDS, CHALLENGES PUBLIC SCHOOLS

■(WASHINGTON) U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley this week strongly defended public education as “the very cornerstone of our nation’s economic and democratic future” and called on all Americans to “come together for the common good of all our children.”

Riley conceded that public education has problems, but said, “More than a debate, we need action — a lot more of that old fashioned American ‘can do’ spirit that brings out the best in all of us.”

To address what he called “the most urgent task,” he announced a new national partnership “dedicated to the single goal of improving reading and writing in America.”

Citing projections that school enrollments will reach an all-time high this fall, Riley also raised several other challenges: to empower parents, to make schools safer, to expand effective innovation and access to technology, to raise academic standards, to prepare young people for jobs, and to assure opportunities for higher education.

Noting that “strong families make for strong schools,” Riley said we must “give parents the power and time to help their children learn more.”

He also stressed the importance of safe, orderly and disciplined schools. Following President Clinton’s lead, Riley said school uniforms may be a way to “create a better atmosphere.”

Riley defended the Goals 2000 school improvement initiative and called for a bipartisan effort to raise academic standards, noting that, “We will only win the battle for excellence if we have excellent teachers. Our schools need to get and hold the best teachers and be willing to weed out bad teachers, to help inexperienced but talented teachers get better, and to reward schools that get results.”

Riley said bringing libraries and classrooms on-line is “a national mission, as important as sending men to the Moon.”

Education needs to “open up,” he said, citing public school choice, schools-within-schools, and the charter school movement as examples. Operating under a public charter, these schools are encouraged to innovate and seek new ways of increasing student achievement. The Education Department currently funds a \$6 million charter school demonstration project.

Riley said he opposes taking taxpayers’ dollars out of public schools for private school vouchers, but said he favors removing restrictions on the use of federal Title I funds placed on private and parochial schools by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1985 *Aguilar v. Felton* decision.

Riley expressed deep concern that private school vouchers would destroy public schools and also fundamentally change the nature of private schools by making them accountable to the public.

Noting that the average income for high school graduates has been declining over the past 20 years, Riley said, “Good paying jobs require more of an education, and that education has to start earlier and be more demanding.” He cited apprenticeships, career academics and tech preps as examples of ways to better prepare students for higher-wage jobs.

Riley called on colleges and universities to “hold the line” on tuition and urged the Congress to maintain funding for student loans and grants. He renewed his call to expand the Direct Student Loan program and voiced support for President Clinton’s merit scholarship, work study and tuition tax deduction proposals.

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