



SPEECH

GOVERNOR'S COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE

BREDESEN SPEECH / 2007 TENNESSEE BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE 3RD ANNUAL EDUCATION SUMMIT

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It's a pleasure to be with you today for the 3rd Annual Education Summit.

I want to commend you and the members of the Tennessee Business Roundtable for your leadership in creating this event... and for your focus on Tennessee's highest priority: the education of our young people. You understand the importance of improving the skills of Tennessee graduates... and of increasing high school graduation rates to prepare our state's workforce of the future.

To everyone who took the time to be here today - thank you. As I look around this room, I'm gratified to see leaders in business... education... and government... With your participation in this summit, you are demonstrating that you understand the importance of working together to achieve these goals that are so very critical to the future of our state.

I'd like to particularly welcome and thank some of our visitors today: Paul Speranza, from the US Chamber of Commerce, as well as Karen Elzey and Samantha Roe. Also Sandy Boyd, joining us from Achieve - thank you all so much for taking the time to be here with us today.

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In my mind, the business community is an essential partner in our work to reform our schools for three reasons; two of them fairly obvious and one perhaps not so obvious. The first is that you have a strong vested interest in improvements in education—you need the workforce. Second, a commitment to real change from the business community is a much longer term and more stable commitment that we can achieve in the political sector—you don't go charging off in a new direction every time there is an election.

And third, perhaps not so obvious, but of great importance: the business world is full of people who know how to get things done. There are great business leaders in this room, who know how to cut to the chase in a complex world. We need your help, here in Tennessee, to help us do just that.

In the past year, you've been an invaluable partner in lending a voice to the education roundtables we've held across the state ... you've given us insight and vision that we can now incorporate into our plan to address the shortcomings of our schools.

The idea behind those education roundtables was simple: you, the business community, are the ones who actually see the results of our school system. Along with those in our higher education system, you are really in the best position to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the students our schools are producing. So I asked you: tell me what you need, and I'll try to begin a process to see to it that we start to produce students that live up to your expectations. What you told us was illuminating, and often surprising.

You let us know, loud and clear, where our shortcomings and strengths are. We knew we needed to do things differently to ensure we are producing students ready for real-world demands and challenges...and we now have a much better idea of how to go about doing that.

I'd like to personally thank those of you who are with us here today who participated in those roundtables People like ... Gary Mabry... Mike Edwards ... Gordon Fee... John Clark ...Ron Harr ... Teresa Sloyan from the Hyde Family Foundations ...and everyone else who joined those conversations and made them such a success.

You enthusiastically came forward with your thoughts and concerns ... and generously lent us your time and your invaluable insight to how we can really begin to change things.

We've talked about some very specific areas where our students need to be better prepared ... things like basic math...problem solving...professional skills. What I'm saying today is: Now, let's take a step back and incorporate what you've told us into our long view. Yes, we need to target some specific areas ...we need to take a good look at how we teach and assess those skills...but we cannot solve the greater shortcomings of the system by doing only that. We need to step back, widen the lens, and take a holistic approach.

With that, I'd now like to ask your help in something I think the business world excels at: simplifying. Great business executives know that true innovative change is not just about some new technology, some new use for the Web, some new compensation plan. Sometimes, the greatest and usually most difficult innovation of all is to simplify. To simplify and focus a business that has become too complicated and blurred - and therefore inefficient and ineffective.

Sometimes we get blindsided by things that seem to be silver bullets, quick fixes, the idea du jour that promises to be a cure-all. At its heart, education doesn't need new technology or new tests or new appropriations nearly as much as it needs the simplicity and focus that you know how to bring. Today I want to present you with a challenge: you have helped us come this far ... now is the time to make the unique contribution that the business world is capable of.

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To help visualize the challenge we face ... not just in Tennessee, but as a nation ... I'd like you to think of a ship, an old three-masted sailing ship, out on the open ocean. Let's call it the U.S.S. Public Education. It's plugging away, it's cutting through the waves, its crew is working hard. But it's begun to fall behind the other ships out there ... flying other flags ... some of them are starting to disappear over the horizon. As we get close to it, we start to see the root of its problem. It's an old ship, and over the years a lot has been added to it. It has new superstructures, extra and unneeded stuff lashed to the decks. Too much has been added to it - all with best intentions, but it's slowing us down.

Now, you know in your hearts how to fix this. And you know in your hearts how not to fix it. It won't help to install the latest electronic navigational equipment ... an ultrasonic knotmeter ... and it won't help to flog the crew. Getting a grant to varnish the mast is beside the point. The problem is that the ship has become too complicated. You have to simplify, you have to focus, you have to strip the excess baggage away. Get rid of the things that aren't essential, and you'll find then that your crew is smart and willing and that ship will catch and pass those others, and regain its rightful place up front.

I'm here today to thank you for your help and interest, and urge you to stay involved, as we work here in Tennessee to fix that ship, once again streamline it and get it back on course.

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I believe with all my heart that the simplicity and focus that is needed in education is to refocus on the individual teacher; a commitment to getting the best possible people to teach in each and every classroom.

Together, we've identified many of our shortcomings and problems ... now how to go about fixing them, at its core, is not about organization, or technology, or measurement; it's about human capital and how to maximize it. Once that is in place, everything else will fall in line. And great business leaders understand this instinctively.

For example - take our new set of standards, the new expectations we are developing with your help. These will only serve us if placed in the hands of capable, enthusiastic, well-trained professionals. At the end of the day, assessment needs to serve as a tool ... as a guide and roadmap ... and we need to see to it that our teachers know how to use that tool accurately and intelligently - not only as a measure of where they are, but as a guide to moving forward.

A focus on teachers has some solid basis in the data.

In Tennessee, we have done comprehensive testing of all students for about fifteen years now - it's known as TVAAS. We do value-added analysis, measuring the gain in knowledge over the course of a year. For those not up on the jargon, this is in contrast to criterion-referenced testing, solely measuring the student's absolute level of knowledge.

There is much to be said for both approaches, but the value-added approach is a better way to measure teacher performance. Regardless of who comes into a teacher's classroom in September, it only measures how far he was able to take them on his watch.

I'm told that with our fifteen years of consistent data—same testing standards—we have the best longitudinal database in America. One of the things that you can do with a great database like this is to use sophisticated statistical techniques to mine it for information. One of the things you can do is to look at various factors - the ones that you can control - and see what they have to do with student performance. When you do this with fifteen years of Tennessee data, the answer is startling: 68%--two thirds--of the variation in student performance is explained by the identity of the teacher. Incidentally, 24% is explained by the specific school, and 8% by the school system.

Let me be very clear - I am not saying race, ethnicity and poverty do not matter in education. They matter a great deal. I am saying that there is great optimism and hope in our data that shows that no matter who you are or where you have come from, if a child is in front of an excellent teacher, and more importantly, a series of excellent teachers, he will make progress and perform well. If an African-American child, a Hispanic child, and a White child all enter the same classroom at the same achievement level, they will typically leave the classroom at the same achievement level.

Teachers are the core ... in the system... in the school... in the classroom. They are the nucleus that holds it all together. Everything else is held in orbit by their gravity.

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Now disagreement tends to come at this point, and we often hear, "That's nice, but with tenure and teachers' unions and all, you can't move the system."

I don't agree; if you reformulate the goal of education reform to first and foremost do everything in your power to get good teachers in the classroom, it opens up a world of possibility. Let me suggest two areas I'm working with—redefining who a teacher is and tightening up the initial selection process.

Taking a cue from the business world, we should do our hiring from as wide and deep a talent pool as possible. Let's revolutionize our thinking as to *who* a teacher is. Career teachers, of course - we have so many dedicated, outstanding teachers in the system here in Tennessee - but also men and women who come into teaching after another career, men and women who may train for other things but for whom a few years in teaching makes sense.

Two years ago, aware of the need to improve math and science in our schools, we started Teach Tennessee - we find mid-career professionals - veterinarians, biologists, engineers, military retirees -- who are interested in teaching, and fast-track them to our classrooms. It has been astonishingly successful; the schools love them, the students love them. They bring great command of the subject matter, they bring new energy, expose our students to a totally different set of life experiences than what they may have ever known at home. I think these teachers can serve as a real inspiration to some of these students to set their goals a little higher.

This is just a small venture to try something, but it has proven to me that there are rich sources of teaching talent outside of the traditional.

I'm going to do the same for younger people - people who didn't study education specifically in college, but who are bright and well-educated and might find a career of a few years in the field rewarding if we had a realistic way to accredit them. Paired with quality teachers already in the system, the benefits would be two-fold: these teachers could bring new energy and ideas to the profession, while learning from the experience of seasoned mentors.

I'd like to expand this idea much more broadly. Teaching is a special profession, with a sense of community and contribution about it that most jobs don't have. I want to use the uniqueness and special nature of teaching to energize, to bring a lot of great people into our classrooms, not for a career, but for a while.

Now let me explore how we might learn something else from business about managing human capital: improving the hiring process.

Even with the changes I've talked about, we're still going to get a great deal of our teaching talent from our schools of education, and in Tennessee those are mostly the state-run schools of education. I'm trying to reformulate a couple of them, to start, and make them less of an academic discipline in a university and more of a professional school, like a law school or a medical school.

At the end of the day, I'm not so much concerned that a teacher has taken courses in classroom management or the history of education. But I do want to know that he's prepared in his subject matter and how to best present it to his students. I do want to know that he has command of the tools of the trade, like reading and understanding and using test scores.

I spoke earlier about the great longitudinal database we have. I asked it a question some time ago and got an interesting answer. In Tennessee a teacher is on probation for the first three years, and is then either terminated or achieves tenure. The question was, "What can you tell about how good a teacher will eventually become from those first couple of years in the classroom?"

The answer was, "Quite a bit."

For teachers who were in the lowest quintile in their first two years, two thirds of them were in one of the two lowest quintiles 5 years later. Conversely, for teachers who were in the highest quintile in their first two years, two thirds of them are in one of the two highest quintiles 5 years later. This reflects something business people know well from their own experience: it's not everything, there are late bloomers and there are fast starters who crash, but you can tell a lot from how someone does in the first year or two.

There are obvious ways to use this information in making tenure decisions; reject the worst, and find a way to delay the decision on the marginal, and I am trying to incorporate these here in Tennessee.

Whenever you propose simplification and slimming down, you open yourself to the criticism that you're naïve. If you're in my field, some may say that you're putting complex issues on a bumper sticker. That is not what I'm doing.

I have found all my life that it is harder to simplify than to make things complex, harder and vastly more rewarding.

Jim Collins from Stanford wrote a book a few years ago called "Good to Great"; I imagine a good many people in this room have read it. He has asked the question, "Based on the return to the public shareholder, what is the most successful company in America over the past thirty years?"

People mostly guess some high-tech name. They're wrong. The answer is Southwest Airlines. That heavily unionized company, basic, low cost airline, in a generally terrible business, they have economically outperformed every high-flyer, every conglomerate, every merger, every exciting New Thing in America.

If there ever were a testament to the power of simplicity and focus, well-executed, it is Southwest Airlines. Limited routes and cities, one kind of airplane, no reserved seats, peanuts, no interline baggage transfer, you can only buy your ticket from Southwest. And they represent not the best performance of any airline, but of any company in America. Simplicity and focus is strength.

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The business community instinctively understands the power of simplicity and focus better than politicians, and we need your leadership to make this happen. What's more, we need your constant and continuing input and energy when it comes to education in Tennessee - I'm asking that you maintain a steady voice that will outlast any single governor or administration.

You are already an engaged and enthusiastic partner in education reform. Today I thank you, and ask you to continue that engagement - taking it to the next step as you continue to lend your energy, insight, and talents to the future of our schools.

Remember that ship out there on the ocean, and remember it once again simplified and focused, cutting through the water, back on course. It will take partnership and cooperation to get there, but I believe that together we can achieve just that.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak with you today, and I look forward to continuing to work together.

Now, we have time for a few questions, and I'll do my best to answer them ...

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