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# Bush's Education Plan Gets Mixed Grades on Anniversary

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KNOXVILLE, Tenn., Jan. 8 -- President Bush has to be careful where he takes the fake chalkboard and tall stools the White House uses to stage television-friendly discussions about his education program.

Thursday marked two years since Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law, and he went on the road to celebrate this week in Missouri and Tennessee -- swing states important to his reelection bid. The White House seeks out schools where No Child Left Behind, which mandates testing and is designed to empower parents, is successful and popular. But finding them takes some research.

No Child Left Behind, which Bush's staff once considered his crowning domestic accomplishment, is under attack by many school administrators, who consider it a rigid intrusion they cannot afford. The states' first round of school evaluations shook the confidence of some parents instead of reassuring them. Bush's program eventually will allow pupils to transfer out of public schools that receive poor scores and do not improve.

In Tennessee, 47 percent of the state's 1,650 elementary, middle and high schools failed to make what the state considers adequate yearly progress under No Child Left Behind criteria. Mary Ann Blankenship, assistant executive director of the Tennessee Education Association, said she has led 100 workshops on the program in the past year.

"I haven't found any place where people are happy with No Child Left Behind," she said.

Blankenship did not attend Bush's 37-minute tribute at West View Elementary School in Knoxville. There he sat on stage with the principal, Melvenia Smith, and repeatedly praised her for the school's progress from below-standard to way above, with 82 percent of third-graders scoring proficiently in reading and math on last year's state tests.

"We're here because you've been successful," Bush said. "Listen, I've heard every excuse in the book about measurement: 'You're testing too much, you're teaching the tests, don't test.' If you don't test, you have a system that just shuffles the kids through. And that's unacceptable."

Bush proudly eschews immersion in policy details, and he told an audience during his day-long celebration of the bill in 2002: "I admit, I haven't read it yet. . . . But I know the principles behind the bill."

Bush made it plain Thursday that he remains wedded to those principles, whatever the ruckus from

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educators. "It is legislation which I would call historic, because for the first time, the federal government is spending more money, and now asking for results," he said. "See, in the past it used to be we would send a check and hope something happened."

His "Oprah"-style panel continued with other administrators from the South, who lauded No Child Left Behind and rattled off data indicating turnarounds in urban and suburban schools. Kathy Cox, the Georgia state school superintendent, exclaimed: "Look out, North Carolina and Texas -- Georgia is on the move!" She added that retooling the school system has been painful and eye-opening.

With former Vermont governor Howard Dean and other Democratic presidential candidates calling funding for No Child Left Behind inadequate, the administration said \$6 billion in funds for Title I, for low-income schools, and IDEA, which requires schools to accommodate students with disabilities, has gone unspent because states did not ask for it.

Ronald J. Tomalis, counsel to Education Secretary Roderick R. Paige, said in a telephone interview from Washington that the money is available to every state. "All they have to do is push a button at the state level when they need the money," Tomalis said.

Tomalis said that only one or two states have asked about refusing Title I money so they would not be bound by the requirements of No Child Left Behind, and two or three states have asked about the consequences if specific districts did so.

"Overall, we are very pleased by the efforts in the states," he said.

Bush is proposing an education budget for next year with increases roughly in line with those he made last year, aides said. The White House announced in Knoxville that Bush's 2005 budget request to Congress will include \$1 billion more than this year for special education and \$1 billion more for low-income schools -- about the same increases he included last year.

The request for kindergarten-through-12th-grade education will be \$36.7 billion, up from \$24.8 billion in President Bill Clinton's last budget. The budget will ask for \$1.26 billion for reading programs, four times the \$286 million in Clinton's last budget, according to the White House.

On the way back to Washington, Bush stopped to raise \$1 million for his reelection in Palm Beach County, Fla., where a flawed ballot design contributed to Florida's disputed election outcome in 2000.

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