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Four Essential Principles for Education Success

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At the research and policy institution where I work, The Heritage Foundation, we have a vision statement. It is this: The Heritage Foundation has a vision for an America where freedom, opportunity, prosperity, and civil society flourish. We recognize, immediately, that this vision is not necessarily unique to our organization and that its sentiments are shared by others, not only in and about America, but also in and about other nations and communities around the world. I suppose that is part of the reason that Heritage's 200,000 contributors have made it the most broadly supported institution of its kind in the world.

It is a humbling responsibility to be the steward of a lofty vision, but it is a challenge that is exciting every day. It is good to look across this great audience and see, from your very presence here, a shared commitment to expend your energies in a truly noble cause.

I don't believe anyone here would be willing to say that they are seeking anything but success. We strive for success in virtually all areas of life. No one says: "Well, I don't know about you, but I sure hope I *fail* today!" No. Success is the prize we seek, and in particular to this conference, success in education.

But what do we mean by "success"? In particular, with all the innovations we can discuss at a conference such as this, in the end, how do we know we are actually achieving success? I want us to give some thought today to what I believe are four critical principles for education success.

Talking Points

- Remember that our goal is success, not process. We often hear of student satisfaction, teacher satisfaction, and even parental satisfaction, but these are byproducts, not the ultimate goal.
- Reform and education innovation must be addressed in the context of universal principles of human nature. The intrinsic human values of freedom, self-determination, choice, and respect must be embraced, since to ignore them is to beg for failure.
- Remember that education does not equal salvation. Without a moral framework within the person and the culture, and a commitment to the development of character traits such as integrity, responsibility, honesty, respect for properly established authorities, and charity, we will not really have succeeded.
- We should always remember to whom we are accountable. Who is the audience? The answer is that lovely word that often invokes mixed feelings in all: *parents*.

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Of course, when we think about education, we normally think about children. As you may have picked up in the introduction, my wife and I have a number of children. I guess that's a little like saying Burger King has "a number" of hamburgers.

We love children. Perhaps that's obvious. But I would safely say that all of us care deeply about children: yours and those who surround you everyday. They are, indeed, the reason most of us are here today. You care about children, about what happens to society when good things happen with, to, and by our children. They are our *legacy*, our one opportunity to slide a foot inside the door of a place called "the future" and perhaps even to stroll about a bit in the possibilities that live there. In fact, it's a place we often prefer to call "hope."

As you have heard, my particular area of responsibility at The Heritage Foundation is to work with the state governors, senior elected officials and cabinet secretaries and advisors, and state legislators across the United States. We like to believe this is important work, and of course it is. It is important because, unlike what most people believe, state and local laws often impact the daily lives of citizens in our country more than those things that happen in Washington. Just as an illustration: 93 percent of the funding for all public education in America comes from money raised and spent at the state and local levels—only 7 percent is from Washington.

I have had the opportunity, over a number of years working with these state and local officials, to observe and discuss with them many policy issues—but few more important than education. I have noticed that numerous efforts, experiments, and innovations in education are, though valiant and well-motivated, not always rooted in any discernable and sustainable principle. As a result, they are less like pinpoint solutions and more like stabs in the dark.

In the early 1980s, I was asked to fill in for a history teacher in a local junior high school in the Cleveland, Ohio, area. At the time, some education guru somewhere had gotten the bright idea that classrooms should not have walls. I don't know why.

So, here we were in a large room; four classes of 25 to 30 students each, one class having a lecture on history, one mathematics, another science, and

so on; a virtual smorgasbord of education, all proceeding at the same time in the same room. It was insane. Eventually they put the walls back up, and I suppose the guy who thought it up lost his job as a consultant—then again, maybe not.

A few weeks ago, I met a particularly flaky British fellow who actually suggested educators launch a program to recruit really good-looking female teachers in order to increase the attentiveness of young male students. I'm not making this up. This fellow has a popular television program in the U.K. Certainly, other ideas—innovations if you will—are much more serious and duly studied, and no one questions motive or good intent. What is needed, though, is a foundation—a core of "first principles"—upon which any number of ideas can be built, yielding the best and most desired ends.

And so, in this context, let me offer for our consideration four principles, though not exhaustive, that I believe simply must be followed if we are to achieve success in our efforts to educate our children and help them step into a hopeful future.

THE FIRST PRINCIPLE: Remember that our goal is success, not process.

We have to always keep in focus that what we are seeking is student success. Let me quickly say, though, that I'm not referring to a frequent stopping point on the way to success, that of "satisfaction." In the education arena, we often hear of student satisfaction, teacher satisfaction, and even parental satisfaction, but these are byproducts, not the ultimate goal.

My good friend and college classmate, Dr. Jerry Pattengale, has done some of the world's best work in this area of student success, but he also has some creative ways of talking about it. Let me relate just one of his true stories—this one from his own life. This story is about basketball, but I think you can easily relate it to soccer if you'd like. He begins:

As I swished my long jump shot, the packed gymnasium roared. Suddenly I was very alone. They were the *wrong fans*, and that was the *wrong basket!* There was nowhere to hide. It was a highly promoted [Indiana] basketball tournament. My team lost, but I won legendary status. I retired as a freshman. Throughout my [growing up

years], I would often pretend in my backyard to hit the winning shot. I hit the long jumper at the buzzer. I experienced the applause. Well, that day on the court with my team, for a few euphoric moments, I lived out that childhood dream. For a lifetime, though, I've relived the nightmare. With a few seconds left, the coach had inserted two new players. They immediately ran to the wrong basket and yelled, "We're open!" As the shooting guard, I shot. The only consolation, in retrospect, is that there was no three-point line. The throbbing noise of laughing foreign fans somehow became muted. An out-of-body experience ensued. I wanted to pull my knee-high gold-stripped socks over my shaggy head and disappear. All three of us—the majority of our team—had run to the wrong end. I had taken the shot. I spent a decade on the court that day. It seemed never ending. It's a disheartening feeling to discover you've shot at the wrong goal.

Many well-meaning educators are working hard. They're yelling for the ball. They're sweating the details just like they should, lost in the process—and the process is necessary—but they've lost sight of the fact that the goal is student success and achievement, and a marriage to the *process* may often get in the way of that goal.

Let me just cautiously interject here an important sidebar: Success, student success, should not be defined too narrowly; that is to say, we are often tempted to make sure that someone is funneled to—and trained in—one skill in order to hold down a job and be a productive member of society. A job and productivity are worthwhile endeavors indeed, but success should be called such when a person has a *broad* education, with as many tools as possible at their disposal, which they in turn can use to secure the maximum number of opportunities as adults. Obviously, educators are called on for career counsel and direction, but we should never be in the business of being too quick to categorize someone as less than capable or limiting opportu-

nity; rather, we should be about expanding opportunity and encouraging full potential.

Let me illustrate this "process vs. success" challenge. My automobile is frequently in the repair shop. Perhaps you know what I'm talking about in this regard. Let's say you took your car to the repair shop, and not just any shop—this was the nicest repair shop you'd ever seen. The mechanic had his tools all lined up perfectly according to size and function; he cleaned each one after its use. The floor is so clean you could eat off of it. Great music playing, unlimited coffee and donuts, a velvet cloth to make sure your auto body doesn't get scratched, and all the latest electronic gizmos—it was great!

Now... you're all done. You get in your freshly deodorized car and drive away. But the car still isn't running right. In fact, it flat out *quits* in the middle of the next intersection. Tell me: How much do the neat and shiny tools, the coffee, music, and condition of the floor mean to you now? It matters not at all!

My friends, let's not get wrapped up in the process, even the process of making sure the students or teachers are satisfied and that the process is meeting its specifications, only to forget our true goal. Someone once said, "It's not the destination that matters; it's the journey." I'm here to tell you that if you don't have a destination clearly in mind, the journey becomes pretty pointless after a while. Sooner or later, no matter how interesting the journey, you finally want to get there.

So, our goal is success, not process.

THE SECOND PRINCIPLE: Reform and education innovation must be addressed in the context of universal principles of human nature.

The desire for freedom, self-determination, personal dignity, choice, equality, and respect for people and for private property are not the sole domain of one country or people, but are those things that stir in the heart of every person simply because they are human, and these values beat within the breast of all people. History demonstrates that these are values that lead to societal and personal success and satisfaction. I watched yesterday—perhaps you did as well—as citizens in Iraq mobbed the statue of Saddam Hussein in the center of Baghdad and toppled it to the ground in a symbolic celebration of an

end to oppression and a new birth of freedom and opportunity.

An interesting thing happens when people have more real choices in their lives, whether it involves education or other matters. A dynamic marketplace appears, a marketplace fueled by people acting in the exercise of their freedom and determining what is best for *them*. Competition between providers in a marketplace begins to bring higher and higher quality for a lower and lower overall cost. The intrinsic human values of freedom, self-determination, choice, and respect must not be resisted in our education innovations, but embraced, since to ignore them is to beg for failure.

Sadly, my own country, the United States, has provided a glaring example of this truth, in a negative way, by ignoring it. Don't get me wrong: I love my country, but just look at this as an example.

The U.S. has spent decade upon decade surrounded by a school system that is, for all practical purposes, a "one-size-fits-all" system. All families are forced to send their children to the government school assigned to them, usually by neighborhood. You don't have any choice whatsoever unless you are rich and can afford to pay twice to send your children to school—once with the taxes you are forced to pay to fund the public system and a second time in private school tuition.

Of course, you can always move to a different house, in a different neighborhood, to be able to go to a different school. But if you are poor, or even middle-class in many cases, you do not really have these choices because of cost. What results is a continuing battle to improve the current system while certain entrenched special interests are fighting the very thing that would make it better for everyone: freedom of choice and opportunity for all of the people.

Let's go back to our automobile for a moment to paint this picture clearly. If the government assigned you an auto repair and gasoline shop, based on where you lived, and told you, "This is your repair shop. This is the only one you can go to," you would, of course, go there because you had no choice. It's "take it there or walk." Yet the quality of the work begins to suffer. Why? Because there is no incentive for them to do a better job. You *have* to come back to them no matter what. Without free-

dom, and a free market, the costs will continue to rise, and the quality will continue to be stagnant or decline.

That is exactly where schools are in my country. The United States spends more and more money on education; in fact, we spend 422 billion dollars—that would be roughly 1.26 *trillion* pesos—each year on elementary and secondary education. Yet the results of the most recent national assessment tests are deeply disappointing. Nearly six in 10 high school seniors do not have a basic knowledge of American history, and more than half of the nation's low-income 4th graders cannot read, even at the basic level.

If you're lucky, you get a great teacher who takes her job seriously and does her best, but the system that surrounds her best effort is still flawed because the consumer cannot exercise the freedom to find another. As a result, even the good work isn't good enough because the standard has gradually been lowered, and even the once-complaining consumer feels they are powerless.

A mother named Cassandra, from the state of Florida, pointed out the problem with a gradually lowering standard. She said, "In third grade, my son Jonathan was making A's and B's on his report card, yet when he was tested, he could not read. My son was on the honor roll, and he could not read." We can so easily see the value of freedom and choice and competition when it comes to automobiles, but up to now, many have been very afraid to allow the same common sense to apply to our children's education

Thankfully, the recognition of freedom in this area by educators and leaders in Sweden, Denmark, Australia, Germany, Belgium, Spain, and many other countries is now finally being pursued in small but vigorous steps in the United States, by state after state, in one way or another. Five states are using a publicly funded voucher program of some sort. Six states are offering tax credits or similar help for poor students. Thirty-nine states have enacted charter school laws. Nine states are now offering statewide public school choice, and over 40 proposals to further authorize parental choice in education have been introduced in state legislative bodies across the U.S. Even Congress is considering some legislation.¹

In April 2002, Harvard University Professor Caroline Hoxby found that increased school choice raises school productivity and student achievement within the public school system. Her report found that competition from charter schools in Michigan and Arizona, and from Milwaukee's voucher program, has compelled public schools to raise their productivity as measured by students' achievement gains.²

And parents agree. A letter from a man named Tony, whose daughters attend schools of choice in the Milwaukee voucher program, said:

The Milwaukee program has let me choose schools that I think are best for my girls. . . . [M]y daughters are excelling. I believe both of them will have a choice to go on to college because of the voucher program. Before, I thought that wouldn't happen. People who once felt they had little or no voice in their children's education now have a choice.

Eulanda, whose daughter Ebony receives a voucher through the Cleveland Scholarship and Tuition Program, is equally pleased:

I care about my child's education. I would do anything, whatever it takes, to get her the best education possible. When I got the letter saying she got a voucher, I was so happy I didn't know what to do. It was like someone coming to my rescue.

The United States, in the several states, will gradually get this right because our leaders are slowly realizing in education what we can see almost every day in the news around the world: People want to be free, and they want to determine their own path. Education innovation that recognizes that will more likely succeed. Innovators who do not recognize it will fail.

THE THIRD PRINCIPLE: Remember that education does not equal salvation.

This is not to say that education is not critical for success. In fact, it often is the key factor in turning a life toward productivity and success. But without a moral framework within the person and the culture, and a commitment to the development of character traits such as integrity, responsibility, honesty, respect for properly established authorities, and charity, we will not really have succeeded.

An evil person with a great education is an infinitely more dangerous person by his education than had he remained relatively ignorant. A well-educated thief is a much more dangerous thief. Some might say that he is a "better" thief; that is to say, he can plan better, be craftier in his trade, and actually reach his full potential as a thief. And though he may, as a result, never be captured and may become the subject of legend, we have to ask the obvious question: Is he successful? Have we, as his educators, done well by him and by society? Has his education saved him or contributed to the culture? Of course, the answer is "no."

This is difficult for some of us to realize, but education is not the final answer to every question. Though it is critical and can make a huge difference, society—and these children—can ill-afford the messianic notion that if we can only get the education thing solved, the world and the children will be saved. The story is bigger than that, and educators and policymakers must be open and encouraging of other cultural elements of church and family and community and other character development forces, without which all of our best efforts will not be ultimately successful.

This is both a relief and a challenge. We are not in this thing alone. There are others who are out there who want to make a difference as much as we do. But it is also a caution that in raising the importance of education, we do not try to make it more than it was ever designed to do. At the very least, we should do nothing to hinder these other positive influences on our students.

1. Up-to-date information on the status of Education Choice in the states can be found in the book *School Choice 2003*, by Krista Kafer, published by The Heritage Foundation, and accessible online at *Heritage.org*.

2. Caroline Hoxby, "School Choice and School Productivity," National Bureau of Economic Research *Working Paper* No. 8873, April 2002, cited in Krista Kafer, "Progress on School Choice in the States," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1639, March 26, 2003.

THE FOURTH PRINCIPLE: We should always remember to whom we are accountable.

Society? Yes, to some extent we answer to “society.” But how do you measure that with any accuracy in the short, correctable term?

Students? In a sense, yes, in that they have to live with the blessings or consequences of what we do. But we cannot consider them an accountability receptor for the same reason most civilized cultures do not allow people who have yet to reach maturity to make other choices.

So, to whom are we accountable? Who is the audience? Who is “the boss”? The answer is that lovely word that often invokes mixed feelings in all: *parents*.

Some might object by saying that we are actually accountable to God for our actions, even in education, and they would be right in the ultimate sense. But interestingly, at least in the case of education, God specifically charges parents with the responsibility of overseeing their children’s education.

Some in education special-interest groups say that parents are unwilling or incapable of being involved in the education of their children—or, worse yet, are not to be trusted. I would simply answer that I believe that most parents love their children and want for them what is best. I have seen an immoral, philandering man who, when it came to his own daughter, would immediately take action to protect her virtue and reputation.

Parents, if given the information they deserve, will make the right decisions that will help their children and help all of us succeed in our mission. Accordingly, parents should be included. And if not, they should demand to be. They deserve no less, since they have entrusted their legacy to us. Often, parents who are not involved are sidelined because they don’t think it will make a difference, or that we will listen to them. Give them a chance, and watch exciting things happen.

If we are committed to the pursuit of the *right* goal of success, and not the politics or the process; if we remember that the human cry is for freedom and

self-determination and we must work within those values to maximum result, that our work is critical but not all of the answer to human need, and that parents can be not only our accountability partners, but our co-workers, we will walk our students confidently through the door of the future, and I believe that door will lead to a place of promise and real success.

I know you share with me an abiding concern for children and the future that confronts them. With your permission, I would like to leave you with one last personal thought.

I’m not sure how it is at your house, but on a given Saturday every week or two, my wife and I like to get out of bed a little slower than the usual 5:30 or 6:00. But, more times than not, over the course of our life, our bedroom has been invaded by one of the children looking for some morning attention of some sort. I am thinking of our little Nasia. (Her name means “miracle of God.”) While my wife and I are in that foggy land between slumber and wakening, more than once, Nasia would slip in, almost unheard, and slide up between the two adult figures on the bed and reach for one or both of us.

In that moment, when her soft and chubby cheek is up against mine, when nothing is really said but the world seems perfectly in place, it is in that moment that I get a glimpse of just what life is about, *why* we do what we do. And I realize that there are some things—some noble causes—worth giving one’s life to.

With God’s help, I hope to do just that, and I know you will do the same. God bless you, and *gracias*.

—Thomas A. Hinton is Director of State Relations at The Heritage Foundation. This address, edited for publication, was delivered on April 10, 2003, at the Third International Symposium on Innovations in Education, held in Mendoza, Argentina. Hinton and his wife, Mary Anne, live in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and are the parents of 10 children.