



Working with students
at Burke High School
in Boston, MA.

U.S. SECRETARY OF EDUCATION: **MARGARET SPELLINGS**

Frank talk on testing, thoughts on merit pay, and even a few tears from this Texas mom.

This summer, *Instructor's* Editor in Chief, Bernadette Grey, traveled from our New York offices to Washington, D.C., for an exclusive one-on-one meeting with the U.S. Department of Education's high-profile leader, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings.

Appointed by President Bush, Spellings is responsible for the overall direction, supervision, and coordination of activities and functions as the Chief Operating Officer for the entire Department.

Spellings, who replaced the controversial Rod Paige earlier this year, has been

focused thus far on implementing No Child Left Behind and on sharing the stories of improved test scores in many of our nation's school districts.

Charming and tenacious, she also made it clear that she feels a special bond with teachers and wants and needs them on her side.

In a wide-ranging conversation, Grey and Spellings touched upon parenting, math and science, the arts, test prep, merit pay, and closing the achievement gap. One thing's for sure: Spellings believes that your jobs are harder than they've ever been. Read on.

What unique qualities do you bring to the Department of Education?

I'm the first mother of school-aged children to have this job. I think being a current consumer of report cards is useful—who would've thought?

How do your children feel about having a Secretary of Education in the family?

When I was in the confirmation process, I spent countless hours filling out forms and drilling down on every nickel and dime in the Department of Education, cramming for my hearing. At the same time, my seventh grader, Grace, was >>

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losing ground in school. In science, she had an A and the next thing I knew, she had a D. I was not too happy, and I went up there and met with her teachers. Grace was very upset with me. She was like, 'I can't believe you! This is so embarrassing—the Secretary of Education is in my school!' So I said, 'Honey, I'll make you a deal. You get your grades up and I'll get out of your school.' And, of course, she had an A the next quarter.

In your experience so far, how do parents feel about No Child Left Behind?

I was heartened to see a new poll that showed that parents are supporting it. They want increased accountability, measurement, and information from schools. Whether it's called "No Child Left Behind" or not, they want to know how it's going out there. I think most parents are not afraid of teaching to the test. They know it's better than what we had before, which was delusional.

How is it going out there? How are teachers, administrators, and districts doing?

We're heading in the right direction, particularly for minority and special education kids. I really believe what gets measured gets done. We are focusing like a laser beam on kids who have too often been left behind. And when you start paying attention to those things, you can move the needle.

How do teachers feel about NCLB?

I think they are initially fearful. They think, 'I'm going to get beat up because they're going to know my kids failed.' But now, schools can say, 'Well, Ms. Smith can teach fractions better than Ms. Jones, and Ms. Jones is better at long division.' And they can inform the process with real information. It's much more precise. And I saw this with my own two eyes, where the same teachers who were saying, 'Too much testing, too much emphasis on the test,' were the same teachers who came up and said, 'Let's add social studies, let's

add science! Let's broaden this and stretch it,' because it starts to help them do their jobs better. Teachers got into the profession because they wanted to do good for kids.

Talk about math and science.

We need to do for math and science what we've done for reading, which is have an understanding of what works, what are the conditions, and what are the necessary ingredients. In reading, we can all sit here and recite the phrases—phonics, phonemic awareness, comprehension of practice, all of that. What are those things for math? What are the conditions for kids to learn? How deep and broad should the curriculum be compared to other countries? Is it rigorous enough? Are the standards rich enough to be responsive to the post secondary education and workforce? My gut tells me we have something called algebra that looks a lot different in one place than it does someplace else. It's also weird to me how algebra is rationed around the country. In Texas, algebra is studied in 8th grade—period. Fairfax County, Virginia? You can forget about taking algebra in the 8th grade unless you petition to the school board. It's that kind of thing mainly.

Do you worry about the arts getting pushed out while we're working on skills?

Smart administrators know that the best way to get results is with a well-rounded curriculum. Maybe some schools got too intense on some of the academics—but now I think they're saying, 'Hey, these are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they're highly complementary.' Just like when we went to school—I learned how to read, and I could sing. But the point is, I don't care who you are, you've got to be able to read. You've got to be able to do some level of computation, or you're not going to make it in this world. It isn't enough to just send you to band practice and say, 'Good luck to you.'

Will NCLB be going to high schools, too?

The fact is we don't have enough kids who are getting out of high school, and those who do get out are not prepared

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well enough for either the workplace or college. And we're spending a ton of money on remediation. We have a huge gulf between the demands and the needs of the workplace and the reality of high school. And taxpayers are complaining, rightly so.

What kind of plans does this administration have to attract teachers?

One, we ought to reward our best teachers for being in our most challenging districts. One of the dirty little secrets in school management—and it's just the way it is—is that some of your best people are given incentives to go to easy schools. We want to change that and make it attractive for them to stay in places where they're most needed. And the second thing, of course, is to figure out ways to reward educators who are getting value and enhancing student achievement for kids. What are you doing to advance the ball without the achievement gap?

You are a believer in merit pay, but how would it work?

There are places that have a union environment, like Denver, that have looked at this. We want to be able to test how this can work, how teachers can be properly rewarded for the important

work that they're doing, which is helping kids. We just don't know very much about how to create reward systems that will succeed in getting the best people to want to stay.

In your opinion, is a teacher's job now harder than ever?

Yes. The job is harder because we are truly striving to meet every child's needs. Teachers are killing themselves, even though they could probably make more money elsewhere, because they love kids. And they believe in it, or they wouldn't be there. They couldn't get out of bed every day otherwise. I feel a bond with teachers and other educators; we're all public servants—I can't say how strongly I feel about the need to do the work that we have to do. (Her eyes well up with tears.) I'm getting choked up here. When teachers tell me, 'I wish the Congress knew...'—they're talking to the Congress through me. We're either going to educate our citizens, or we're not going to live in a democracy and we're not going to have jobs. I get choked up about it. That's why people are teachers—they're working one heart, one soul, one light bulb at a time. We have a shared responsibility to tell the world how critical this is, our work. And to make people pay attention. □

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