

Charles P. Garcia Speech  
Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce Business Leadership Council  
Coral Gables, FL

**Thank you ...it is both an honor and a privilege to be invited here today to speak to such an illustrious group of businesspeople in South Florida.**

**I'd like to begin my discussion today by asking this audience of successful business people to reflect on your success by asking one simple question.**

**Do you think that you could have arrived at your current station without the ability to read, to write, to reason and to do math?**

**I think we could safely say that the answer is no. Education, I would venture to say for most of you, was instrumental in laying the foundation for your present achievements.**

**If your success was based in large measure on your education is there any reason to believe that the importance of a good education is any different today?**

**In fact, it is more important today that the children of this state receive more than just an adequate education; it is imperative that they receive an excellent education to ensure their success for tomorrow.**

**For it is in their success as students that we ensure the success for business in the state. Today, as our society has changed, much of our worth as individuals is measured not by our strength but by our knowledge, our value is measured not by the amount of sweat produced on our brow, but by the brilliance of ideas created through the use of our brains.**

**Our earning power is dictated not by our physical capabilities but by our intellect, our ability to write, our ability to reason, our ability to design, to create, to compute, to be engineers, architects, writers, scientists and entrepreneurs.**

**This knowledge is the foundation for good, valuable and productive employees. And it is the student's acquisition of this knowledge that will ensure the success of Florida's private enterprise.**

**So it is with great dismay that today in Florida a staggering 40 percent of this state's children do not graduate from high school, which ranks Florida as 49<sup>th</sup> in the country. Moreover, of the sixty percent that graduate only half of those go to college, ranking us 47<sup>th</sup> in the nation.**

**So, when I received a call from the Governor's office last May when I was visiting one of our offices in Brazil, and I was invited to become only one of seven members of the Florida Board of Education**

**I mulled it over.....and after about 2 seconds I agreed to participate. Did I know what I was getting myself into, absolutely not. Did I know that it would consume one day per week away from my own business, absolutely not.**

**Did the job pay anything, absolutely not. And had I known any of this before accepting the position would it have changed my mind, absolutely not.**

**Why? Because as a member of this new and revolutionary governmental entity we not only have an opportunity to create an education template that can serve as a model for other states, but even more importantly, we can have a direct and positive impact on more than 3.5 million children in Florida.**

**When I asked why I was chosen by the governor to become a member of this new organization I was told that they had heard about my commitment to education. I was told that they were looking for a businessman, an entrepreneur to bring a fresh perspective to educational reform in Florida.**

**I am proud to say that the Governor created a board that not only represents a wide range of interests, but most importantly is comprised of an exceptional group of professionals who are experienced and dedicated to the cause of improving educational opportunities for all students throughout the state.**

**As you probably already know, one of our Board members, Dr. Linda Eads, is the founder of the Mast Academy, and is a resident of Coral Gables, where her husband Jack served as city manager for many years.**

**So, what was it that triggered the dawn of a new day for education in Florida?**

**In 1998, Florida citizens amended the state Constitution, receiving a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to redesign an education governance model. To implement the mandate of the people, over the next two years, Governor Jeb Bush, Lt. Governor Frank Brogan, and the Florida Legislature assembled a prestigious bi-partisan Blue Ribbon Committee, followed by a Transition Task Force.**

**These two entities brought together citizens and scholars representing all aspects of education. In June 2001, based on their findings, Governor Jeb Bush signed a sweeping education law, making Florida the first state in the nation to design, enact, and implement an accountability based, student centered K-20 educational structure.**

**For the first time, the public and private school system, community college and university systems are united and working collaboratively to ensure every student's educational needs are met.**

**For the first time, Florida’s educational system will be well coordinated, and student centered.**

**For the first time, our state will provide useful, and current, web-based information on educational choices to families, both in the public and independent sectors.**

**For the first time, Florida will lead the nation in K-20 educational reform.**

**And most important, Florida’s Governor will be held accountable for the education of the state’s citizens.**

**This new education system eliminated more than 20 ineffective bureaucratic boards, among them, the Board of Regents, which for nearly 50 years governed the state university system.**

**So, why is it then that U.S. Senator Bob Graham, a former two-term Florida Governor and a man dedicated to serving this State, conjure images of “firing squads,” “assassinations,” and “anthrax-like infections” to sell a new incarnation of the now-abolished Board of Regents through an amendment to the Florida constitution?**

**Why does Senator Graham want Florida to return to a centralized system of educational governance weighted down by a massive bureaucracy more concerned about retaining bloated budgets than the actual quality of education received by each student?**

**Why does Senator Graham ignore the university presidents who insist that the Board of Regents outlived its usefulness, and that the newly created Florida Board of Education and university Boards of Trustees leaves their institutions better able to serve local communities?**

**Simply answered – because he fears change. But change is inevitable, and change should be embraced, especially when the status quo is not working, as was clearly the case with the Board of Regents.**

**Since the beginning of time, the world’s most revolutionary ideas met the most resistance.**

**Senator Graham’s efforts to impede educational modernization hark back to an 1829 letter by New York Governor Martin Van Buren to President Andrew Jackson.**

**I would like to read for you a letter written 180 years ago, and like Senator Graham’s “firing squads” and “anthrax-like infections” metaphors, it too defends**

**the “status quo” by conjuring up practically the collapse of the world and mirrors the debate on this issue.**

Martin Van Buren  
Governor of New York

1829

The Honorable President Andrew Jackson  
The White House

Dear Mr. Jackson,

The canal system of this country is being threatened by the spread of a new form of transportation known as "railroads." The federal government must preserve the canals for the following reasons:

If canal boats are supplanted by "railroads," serious unemployment will result. Captains, cooks, drivers, repairmen, boat builders and lock tenders will be left without means of livelihood, not to mention the numerous farmers now unemployed growing hay for horses.

Canal boats are absolutely essential to the defense of the United States. In the event of the expected trouble with England, the Erie Canal would be the only means by which we could ever move the supplies so vital to waging modern war. The government should create an Interstate Commerce Commission to protect the American people from the evils of "railroads," and to preserve the canals for posterity.

As you know, Mr. President, "railroad" carriages are pulled at an enormous speed of 15 miles per hour by "engines" which, in addition to endangering the life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside, setting fire to crops, scaring the livestock and frightening women and children. The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed.

Sincerely,

*Martin Van Buren*

Martin Van Buren  
Governor of New York

**Reflecting on this communication between these two titans of politics at the time, seems so, well, silly.**

**In this light, the good Senator's disagreement with Governor Jeb Bush over educational reforms also seems silly.**

**Senator Graham is a great man of wisdom and integrity, clearly dedicated to education. Instead of fighting the electoral will of the citizens of Florida to amend, for a second time, the State's constitution, Senator Graham should use his great stature to facilitate our efforts to secure as much federal funding as possible to benefit the students and teachers of Florida.**

**I have personally challenged Senator Graham to spend one of his highly regarded "work-days" laboring shoulder-to-shoulder with the newly formed seven-member Florida Board of Education, whose accomplishments to date are in fact revolutionary.**

**Let me give you some examples.**

**Prior to the Florida Board of Education the statutes that dictated our states' entire school policy was a 5000-page compilation of books weighing over fifty pounds known as "The School Code."**

**This jungle of legislative red tape was fuzzy, ambiguous impenetrable, and incomprehensible. I repeat, 5000 pages, 50 pounds.**

**I challenge anyone in this room to become an expert in any area that contains this many rules and regulations mired in the compromises of entrenched lobbying groups during nearly three quarters of century of law making.**

**Our first goal was to rewrite the education code.**

**A team was pulled together of over 200 stakeholders from every sector of education in Florida public and private universities, community colleges, K-12 public schools, private schools and others stakeholders to recommend improvements and streamlining.**

**This rewrite was a collaborative process that demonstrated that our K-20 system is working and the process created a reform model for the nation. I am proud to say that we have slashed the original 5,000 page School Code by nearly two-thirds its original size.**

**The new law is now manageable, and easily understood, and I am pleased to say has been trimmed to a figure even Jenny Craig would be proud—the new code weighs in at less than 10 pounds.**

**There are three other important accomplishments of the new educational system. These are (1) the first real strategic plan; (2) the passing of a coordinated K-20 budget; and (3) a four-year baccalaureate degree program for community colleges.**

**The Board is close to completing the Strategic Plan, this will be a living document that will guide the work of the Board in setting policy and will ensure consistency and focus in decision-making.**

**We identified 8 critical areas to focus on that have come to be known as our Strategic Imperatives.**

**Imperative one is to increase the supply of highly qualified K-12 teachers.**

**Two is to apply existing academic standards on a consistent basis at all levels – ending the practice of social promotion.**

**Three is to increase the graduation rates, especially in high school and raising the proportion of K-12 graduates, who enter postsecondary education without remediation.**

**The fourth Strategic Imperative is to improve the quality of school leadership at all levels.**

**Number five is setting and aligning academic standards for every level of the k-20 education system.**

**Number six is to appropriately align the workforces' education with the skill requirements of the new economy.**

**Seven is aligning financial resources with performance expectations at each level of the K-20 education system.**

**And finally, the eight is for the state to achieve national recognition of our institutions of higher learning.**

**The next achievement is a coordinated K-20 budget for all schools which for the first time in Florida's history has emerged as being both rational and unified.**

**The Florida Board of Education produced the first K-20 budget ever – a cooperative effort among previously competing sectors.**

**Another key achievement is expanding access to post-secondary education.**

**The Florida Board of Education approved selected baccalaureate programs at Miami-Dade Community College, based on unmet need for four-year teaching degrees.**

**The Board also approved cooperative baccalaureate degree offerings at Chipola Junior College and Edison Community College, working in concert with Florida State University and Florida Gulf Coast University.**

**Through these efforts, the Board is opening more opportunities for Floridians to achieve baccalaureate degrees.**

**This is an example of K-20 cooperation finding new solutions to education challenges in Florida.**

**As business owners, as community leaders, as entrepreneurs, and simply as mothers, fathers, and parents, we want to see our children receive the best education possible.**

**This will not only ensure the success of their futures, but by extension the success of all business in this state for today, tomorrow and the future. Thank you....**

**At this time, I am happy to answer any question that you may have.**

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