

# Upgrading educational opportunities for the new millennium

U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley has pushed for education reform and innovation on a national scale since being appointed by President Clinton in 1992. He has launched initiatives to raise academic standards, to improve instruction for the poor and disadvantaged, to expand federal grants and loan programs to allow more Americans access to college, to implement school-to-work programs and to improve teaching.

After being re-appointed for a second term, Riley helped win an historic ruling by the Federal Communications Commission to give schools and libraries deep discounts for Internet access and telecommunications services, and helped win major improvements in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Riley is a former two-term governor in the state of South Carolina.

Following are excerpts from a recent interview with *Colleagues*:

**Q. How would you evaluate the state of the K-12 educational system in the United States as we prepare for the 21st century?**

**A.** I am optimistic about public education in our nation and the state of most of our K-12 educational system.

One major challenge is to help make sure that all students master the basics once and for all. This means putting challenging standards of learning into practice in every classroom, and making sure every child can read well by the end of the eighth grade and understand the basic foundations of math, including algebra and some geometry. We need to maintain these kinds of high levels in the upper years of K-12 schooling.

Another area of concern is making sure that we have the necessary numbers of quality teachers in every classroom to help our young people reach these high levels of achievement. The number of students in our classrooms over the next 10 years will be more than at any time in history and we will require two million new teachers during this period. This is a great challenge, but one I know we can meet if all interested parties elevate teaching as a career and we begin to focus on stronger recruitment, training and support of teachers.

**Q. How does our approach to education — and the ways and means of providing it — differ from 25 years ago?**

**A.** There are indeed dramatic differences between how we approach education now and how we did a quarter century ago. We now have a nationwide movement to incorporate challenging measurable standards of learning in every classroom. These standards, when included in teaching and learning, will help ensure that every student, in every state, will receive a quality education to help him or her succeed in the workforce of tomorrow. Also different today is a new emphasis on school-to-career or school-to-work learning programs. This educational approach combines advanced course work, technology skills and real-life learning to prepare high school students for college and the cutting-edge jobs of the 21st century. Another change is the significant increase among families and students who want to go to college today, thereby increasing their opportunities for learning and building a strong and secure future.

**Q. Are we, as a nation, better preparing our children for college today than we did for the previous generation?**

**A.** The American people are tuned into education these days as never before. They expect every educator and policy maker to help build and provide schools and colleges that are academically rigorous, efficiently run and accessible and affordable to every qualified student. They expect it because they know that now — more than ever before — their future and their children's future depend on it. As a nation, we must work harder in preparing our children and youth to be equipped to succeed in post-secondary education. This demonstrates a renewed commitment to the importance of learning and working hard in school. We need to continue on this path by making sure that our students are getting rigorous training and a firm ground-

ing in the basics so that they are prepared for the advanced study that takes place in college and the world of work. This includes making sure that every student knows how to read well and appreciates the value and joy of reading, and can also master the important mathematical concepts like algebra and geometry. These are the gateway courses to more complex learning and ways of thinking which can put a student on the right track to getting a quality higher education. Without this strong foundation, students are more likely to drop out and be at risk for a lifetime of diminished success in school and employment.

We also need to make sure that every student who works hard has access to college.



Q&A

U.S. SECRETARY  
OF EDUCATION  
RICHARD W. RILEY

**Q. Although the majority of funding for school districts is performed at the state and local levels, do you foresee the federal government taking a more active funding role — through grants or other means — to help improve some of the decaying infrastructures for**

**financially troubled districts?**

**A.** As former governors, President Clinton and I strongly support the concept that education is primarily a state and local function. At the same time, we believe that having an educated citizenry is a matter of economic growth and national security. Therefore, we are doing everything we can to assist and encourage local and state efforts at strengthening schools and improving teaching and learning. This is why President Clinton has made education the centerpiece of his agenda and why he stood strong in the face of congressional efforts to eliminate or reduce investments in education. It is also why we are working to strengthen teaching and learning by helping to build cooperative efforts between schools and the parents and communities around them.

**Q. As partnerships in education between businesses and local school districts become more commonplace, what do you see as the greatest benefits or drawbacks of these types of individually tailored programs?**

**A.** Business leaders have demonstrated a real interest in education and they have taken the lead in many areas, including raising education standards and bringing technology into schools. Business leaders understand that an educated workforce is a productive workforce, and the only way to ensure this occurs is by building high quality schools for all Americans. I am pleased that we have been able to help build the kinds of public-private partnerships that are now at work in many communities across the nation, and I hope these will continue. But I would also challenge businesses — large and small — to go even further and encourage their employees and associates to become mentors and tutors for students in their areas. Some businesses are doing this, and they are making a real difference. They also can become family-friendly in their own policies, making sure that their employees who are parents, grandparents or interested citizens can get involved in their children's schools and that they have the time they need during the work day to strengthen that involvement. That is a very important aspect of improving our schools and strengthening our communities.