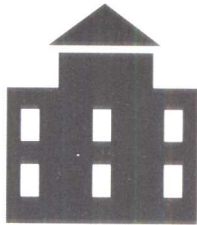
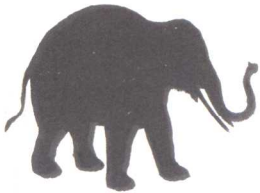


Joel Spring

# CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The Politics of American Education



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T H I R D E D I T I O N

# *Conflict of Interests*

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## *The Politics of American Education*

THIRD EDITION

*Joel Spring*

*State University of New York,  
College at New Paltz*



*Boston, Massachusetts Burr Ridge, Illinois Dubuque, Iowa  
Madison, Wisconsin New York, New York San Francisco, California St. Louis, Missouri*

# McGraw-Hill

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS  
*The Politics of American Education*

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

4 5 6 7 8 9 0 FGR/FGR 0 5 4 3 2 1 0

ISBN 0-07-060579-3

*This book was set in Palatino by Graphic World, Inc.  
The editor was Beth Kaufman;  
the production supervisor was Kathryn Porzio.  
The cover was designed by John Hite/Joan O'Connor.  
Project supervision was done by Tague Publishing Service, Inc.  
Quebecor Printing/Fairfield was printer and binder.*

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Spring, Joel H.

Conflict of Interests : the politics of American education / Joel  
Spring.—3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-07-060579-3 (alk. paper)

1. Education and state—United States. 2. Politics and education—  
United States. I. Title.

LC89.S66 1998

379.73—dc21

97-14052

<http://www.mhhe.com>

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# Preface

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This third edition includes a new first chapter, "Educational Politicians and the Doctors of Spin." The chapter examines the impact of President Bill Clinton's New Democratic politics on educational policies and the influence of the Christian Coalition on the Republican Party. In the 1996 election, there was an important realignment of educational policies between the two political parties. The Christian Coalition's control of the educational sections of the 1996 Republican National Platform curtailed Republican advocacy of Goals 2000. The Republican platform called for the end of the Department of Education and Goals 2000. Elected with a promise to fulfill their *Contract with America*, the Republican Congress led by Newt Gingrich also proclaimed its desire to reduce federal involvement in education. Forced to abandon Goals 2000, Republican campaign statements on education were limited to discussions of school choice and privatization.

Assuming leadership over federal education policies, President Clinton applied the strategies advocated by New Democrats. A key element in this strategy is winning back to the Democratic Party white middle-class voters who were alienated by the party's previous focus on helping the poor and minority groups. In making this appeal, Clinton promised to use a combination of federal grants and tax deductions to make the first two years of post-secondary education available to all high school graduates. These education proposals were part of a general New Democratic economic policy to reduce declining wages and job insecurity for the middle class.

I updated chapters to reflect the new era of education politics. In Chapter 4, I added a section, "The Revolt Against Bureaucracy," explaining the ideological origins of attacks on educational bureaucracies. Beginning with the influence of Austrian economics in the 1950s, conservatives identified the problem with public schools to be bureaucratic control. Their solution was the application of free market economics. Out of this thinking came the first proposals for school choice. New Democrats incorporated these ideas into a call for reinvention of schools. I discuss this in a new section to Chapter 6, "Reinventing the Schools."

Joel Spring

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# *Educational Politicians and the Doctors of Spin*

"Oh, listen, honey, I know . . . I'm sorry . . . we got stuck here. But great news. Real progress with the teachers," apologized the presidential-candidate Governor Jack Stanton over the phone to his wife after being delayed by a romantic interlude with Ms. Baum, a member of the regional board of a New York City teachers' union.<sup>1</sup> Governor Jack Stanton, from a small state in the South, is the main character in the popular 1996 novel *Primary Colors* whose author, listed as Anonymous on the title page, was later revealed to be *Newsweek's* columnist Joe Klein.<sup>2</sup>

Opening with Governor Stanton's visit to Ms. Baum's literacy program in Harlem and their brief tryst in a New York City hotel, the novel provides insight into the role of educational issues in politics, and the behind-the-scenes struggles over campaign strategy and media images. For example, discouraged after losing the Democratic primary in New Hampshire, Governor Stanton describes to his wife, Susan Stanton, a conversation with a preschool teacher during one of his table-to-table campaign visits in a New Hampshire restaurant. Governor Stanton told the teacher of the wonderful education projects started in his state—Bill Clinton was known as the education Governor in Arkansas—and his interest in Head Start. The teacher replied that she would never have guessed his interest in education issues from the New Hampshire campaign. Governor Stanton concludes from the encounter, "We gotta figure out how to communicate what we *love* about what we do."<sup>3</sup>

Today, communicating to voters involves manipulation of media images and giving the correct spin to events. The doctors of spin have the responsibility of interpreting events so that they sound favorable to their candidate. For instance, Governor Stanton's spin doctors interpreted his second-place showing in the New Hampshire primary as a victory rather than a defeat. It was a victory, the spin doctors claimed, because they didn't expect Governor Stanton to do well in New Hampshire and, as a result, his second-place position proved he was a strong candidate.

Mary Matalin and James Carville were campaign managers and spin doctors for President George Bush and Governor Bill Clinton, respectively, in the 1992 presidential campaign. "When you're spinning a reporter," Carville states in their coauthored book—they married after the campaign—"you're telling them how to look at a story. Or you're telling them they're covering it wrong."<sup>4</sup> Mary Matalin describes preparation for spinning reporters after a Bush-Clinton debate in 1992. During the debate, Bush's pollsters continually monitored a focus group for their reaction to topics discussed by Bush. Those topics receiving high and low marks along with four or five issues to emphasize with reporters were distributed in a one-page list to Bush's political spinners just before the end of the debate. The purpose of the list was to ensure that all spinners emphasized the same points. The spinners then rushed into a room—the spin session for this debate was held in a cavernous gym at Washington University—and were met by a shouting crowd of reporters from television and newspapers. The job of the spinners was to project the most positive image of their candidate to the news media. Here, Republican spinners stated that in the debate George Bush personified an experienced leader, while Clinton appeared as just another politician. In addition, the spinners emphasized Bush's position on health issues because they received a high rating by pollsters during the debate.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, education has become an important issue for campaign managers and the doctors of spin. In 1988, presidential candidate George Bush rallied educational supporters of the Republican party with the announcement, "I want to be the education president, I want to lead a renaissance of quality in our schools." Three years later, his claim to be "education president" backfired when he was criticized for not getting his educational initiatives through Congress. A. Graham Down, president of the Council of Basic Education, said in 1991 regarding Bush's educational efforts, "I would give him [President Bush] a C-minus, maybe a D-plus. I mean, he hasn't really done much except talk, and talk is cheap."<sup>6</sup> In the 1992 and 1996 campaigns Bill Clinton adopted the image of education president.

Politicians, including presidential, congressional, gubernatorial, and state legislative candidates, find educational topics appealing because they project the image of a person who cares about human values. In addition, politicians can tie education to economic concerns and, therefore, can claim that investment in education contributes to economic growth.

Of course, as I will discuss throughout this book, education is also a contentious topic. Issues of values, multiculturalism, school organization, and financing divide members within political parties and are reflected in the ideology of the Democratic and Republican parties.

As illustrated by *Primary Colors*, educational politicians hope to appeal to various interest groups. Governor Jack Stanton wanted to capture teachers' votes which often means appealing to the two teachers' unions. President Bill Clinton, as I will describe below, also sought the support of the business sector for his educational policies. Opposing Clinton were special-interest groups representing the religious right.

## CONFLICTING POLITICAL GROUPS IN EDUCATION

In this chapter, I am focusing on the major actors in the politics of education. As indicated in Table 1-1, I subdivide these categories into a range of often-conflicting groups. Under the category of government officials, I am including educational politicians, administrative politicians, boards of education, and the courts. The category of politicians includes elected officials in federal, state, and local governments. Because of the educational focus of this book, I am considering boards of education as a separate category, though most members are elected and could be considered educational politicians.

My intention is to explain the role of each group in the politics of education. You should keep in mind that conflicts of interest are not necessarily negative. Conflict is often the dynamic force that drives political systems to seek new solutions. On the other hand, conflict does result in losers and winners. It is a struggle over control of the educational system. Depending on your own political ideology, you might be pleased or distressed by the losers and winners in the U.S. educational system.

### POLITICIANS

In 1996, *USA Today*/CNN/Gallup found that education was the major concern of the U.S. public. When asked to identify the issues on which they would vote for president, 67 percent responded the quality of K-12 education, while 66 percent identified crime, and 64 percent chose the economy. This poll shows the importance for politicians of projecting a positive image regarding education.<sup>7</sup>

I need to emphasize the issue of “a positive image” because many voters are unclear about the political debate over education. As pollster Mark Mellman states, “[Education] is sort of vague at the federal level, but it’s a for-it-or-against-it kind of thing. And if you’re against it, you’re in trouble.”<sup>8</sup>

As a case study of an educational politician, I am going to explore Bill Clinton’s evolution from the “educational” governor of Arkansas to the Chair of the National Governors Conference to his tenure as an “educational” President. Clinton’s story reflects the use of a positive educational image in building a political career.

**TABLE 1-1. The Major Political Groups in Education**

Major Government Actors	Special-Interest Groups
Politicians	The Big Three
Administrative politicians	Teachers’ unions
School boards	Corporate sector
	Foundations
	Other interest groups

Education became a focus in Clinton's political career after having won the governorship of Arkansas in 1978. He lost it in the 1980 election. The 1982 election returned Clinton to the governor's mansion under the banner that education was the key to Arkansas's economic revival. He called for emphasizing the teaching of basic skills, expansion of educational opportunities for the poor, and emphasizing vocational and high-technology programs.

"Hillary Clinton," Meredith Oakley, the editor and political columnist of the *Arkansas-Democrat Gazette*, states, "was responsible for her husband's decision to emphasize education reform above all other matters in his second term."<sup>9</sup> After his second election, Bill, Hillary, and his advisors decided that during his first term he projected a confused public image by trying to do too much. It would be best, they concluded, to emphasize educational reform and create a public image of Bill Clinton as the "education governor."

In adopting this approach to public image-building, other Southern governors who would also affect educational politics and policies in the 1990s joined Clinton. During the 1980s, Tennessee's Governor Lamar Alexander and South Carolina's Richard Riley stressed educational reform as the key to the economic development of their states. In 1996, Lamar Alexander attempted to follow in Clinton's footsteps by running in the Republican presidential primary.

Clinton, Alexander, and Riley were to play leading roles in the National Governors Association and the creation of Goals 2000. In 1986, Bill Clinton was elected to the vice chair of the National Governors Association. The chair of the organization was Lamar Alexander of Tennessee. In 1989, President Bush asked the National Governors Association to develop what would become the Goals 2000 agenda.<sup>10</sup> The request by President Bush was part of his promise to be the "education president." In 1990, Bush presented these goals to Congress in his 1990 State of the Union address. Lamar Alexander, whom President George Bush eventually appointed Secretary of Education, pushed the Goals 2000 agenda. After President Clinton's election in 1992, Clinton signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act.

Hillary's role in building Bill Clinton's educational image is extremely important. Beginning with her involvement as a lawyer in the Children's Defense Fund in the 1970s to the publication of her book, *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (1996), she has been an important crusader for educational reform.<sup>11</sup> During Bill Clinton's second gubernatorial term, he appointed Hillary chair of the state's Education Standards Committee that Arkansas's Quality Education Act of 1983 created. Other members of the Education Standards Committee agree that the final report reflected Hillary's agenda.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of statewide education standards for educational reform would haunt educational politics throughout the 1990s. The assumption is that creating academic standards for student performance will force local school districts to improve instruction. Schools, it is assumed, will raise student achievement to the level of the state standards.

Creating standards to reform schools has a great deal of political appeal because it doesn't necessarily require raising taxes to increase educational

spending. The underlying message of the educational standards movement is that the primary problem with education is that local school districts and teachers are not working hard enough to increase student achievement. The whip of high state achievement standards, it is assumed, will drive school districts and teachers to reform instruction.

Bill Clinton would eventually advocate the idea of standards as the key to educational reform at meetings of the National Governors Association. By the time of his presidency, Bill Clinton was advocating world and national standards as the key to the economic development of the United States.

The major result of Clinton's campaign in Arkansas for educational reform was increased ratings in the polls.<sup>13</sup> His doctors of spin proclaimed that educational reform had resulted in a victory for the people of Arkansas. In the public mind, he was now the "education governor." With his popularity running high, Clinton spent little time campaigning in 1984. With the subsequent passage of legislation giving Arkansas governors four-year terms, Clinton's position was secure.

The 1992 presidential election between Bush and Clinton promised to be an "education election." In 1991, the year before the election, the Bush administration created the New American Schools Development Corporation. Officials within the Bush administration admitted that plans for the establishment of the corporation were part of a larger strategy to ward off criticism during the 1992 presidential election campaign that the Bush administration lacked a coherent domestic agenda. Against this background of criticism, Bush unveiled plans to reform American education and to fulfill his 1988 pledge to be the "education president." This reform package included the creation of model schools, incentives for parental choice of schools, and, of course, Goals 2000. Highlighting the political nature of the Bush reform package was its development and supervision by the highly skilled educational politician Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander, Clinton's former Republican colleague in the National Governors Association and the former "education governor" of Tennessee.<sup>14</sup>

On the other side, Clinton planned to attack President Bush for not carrying through on his promise to enact the Goals 2000 agenda. In their 1992 campaign book, *Putting People First: How We Can All Change America*, Bill Clinton and Al Gore wrote, "Government fails when our schools fail. For four years we've heard a lot of talk about 'the Education President' but seen little government action to invest in the collective talents of our people."<sup>15</sup> Clinton and Gore promised to enact Goals 2000 within their first 100 days in the White House (in this campaign document it is called the 1989 Education Summit's "National Education Goals"), including national examinations and national standards.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, the importance of education as a campaign theme depended on the doctors of spin and the image makers. The problem facing President Bush in 1992 and the Republican presidential candidate in 1996, Bob Dole, is the sharp division within the Republican Party between moderates and the right wing. In Chapter 2, I will examine the divisions within the Republican and Democratic parties over education issues. What I want to stress here is the dif-

faculty for national Republican leaders to please the different constituencies within their party.

As a moderate Republican, Bush faced the problem in 1992 of creating a national campaign theme that would unite the various elements of his party. One item not supported by right-wing Republicans were Goals 2000 because of possible increased federal intrusion in local schools. In a haphazard manner, the Bush media managers latched onto the theme of "Family" to unite the party.

Mary Matalin tells the following story of how "Family" emerged as the campaign theme. During the 1992 primary, Matalin and others were flying aboard Air Force One trying to complete a speech for Bush to deliver upon landing. A former Louisiana Representative, Henson Moore, strolled through the cabin suggesting a nice sound bite "Jobs, Family, Peace." They put it in the speech but not as part of a central strategy. It was just to be a good sound bite.<sup>17</sup>

As media managers know, television news programs look for short statements in speeches that can be easily featured. Television news programs are limited in time they can focus on any one topic. Therefore, the perfect sound bite is one that allows for quick and easy use by the media. The media jumped on the sound bite and emphasized "Family." Matalin claimed that the campaign would have preferred an emphasis on "Jobs" and "Peace." There was no intention in the campaign to stress "Family."<sup>18</sup>

Bush's running mate and representative of the more conservative faction of the Republican Party, Dan Quayle, added to focus on the family by singling out the television program *Murphy Brown* as representing how television, movies, and liberals were undermining traditional family values. Quayle's criticism of *Murphy Brown* caught Republican strategists by surprise. In fact, Matalin reported that at a White House senior staff meeting she was the only one who actually knew the program. To support Quayle, the White House staff members decided to spin the line that Quayle's statement was related to a general breakdown of the family caused by government programs and television.<sup>19</sup>

The episode with Quayle and Bush's sound bite left the impression that family values were the central message of the Republican campaign. In Matalin's words, "No one believes this, but *there never was a strategy to place family values at the center of our message.*"<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the whole third night of the 1996 Republican convention was devoted to the "Family." The emphasis on the family and family values appealed to right-wing Republicans and conveyed to the public that the right-wing, as opposed to the moderate-wing, was in control of the Republican Party. From Matalin's perspective, this doomed the Republican campaign in 1992. The real issue for voters, she believed, was the economy. Republican positions on the economy were lost in the emphasis on family values.

Campaign themes are important for shaping the educational policies of a political party. As I will discuss in Chapter 2 regarding the current ideological positions of the Republican Party, there is little room for support of national standards and testing. The Republican emphasis on family values resulted in

stressing family control over education and not national standards created by the federal government. For Republicans, family control in the 1992 election meant giving parents the power to choose their children's education.

On the other hand, a campaign emphasizing the economy can make room for national standards and testing through claims that they will raise school achievement and as a result cause economic growth. This is what happened in the 1994 Democratic campaign when Clinton boasted of his record as an "education governor." Similar to advisors to the Republicans, James Carville and his staff had a difficult time arriving at a central theme for the Clinton campaign. They also believed the economy, particularly unemployment and jobs lost to corporate restructuring, were central concerns in the minds of the voters. After three months of strategic planning—that's right, three months—they created the key media sound bite and image, "Putting People First." Carville wrote, "Ask five people who came up with it, they'll all say they did. I believe it was me, but I could be wrong."<sup>21</sup>

Under the banner "Putting People First" were placed many issues regarding the economy including education. The campaign book, *Putting People First*, stressed the importance of Goals 2000.<sup>22</sup> Clinton's acceptance speech at the 1992 Democratic convention was laced with the importance of creating jobs to meet the needs of an expanding global economy. Within the framework of what Clinton called the "New Covenant," educational reform would become part of a general global economic strategy and education would solve the problem of unemployment by training workers for high-skilled jobs. In his speech, Clinton said, that one thing the Covenant was about was, "An America in which the doors of college are thrown open once again to the sons and daughters of stenographers and steelworkers."<sup>23</sup>

Again in 1996, Bill Clinton was off and running as the "education president." Continuing to link success in the global economy to education, Clinton announced a voluntary program, 21st Century Teachers, that would instruct 500,000 teachers in the classroom use of computers. The National Education Association agreed to cooperate with the program and encourage volunteers at its 1996 national meeting. Delivering the commencement address at Princeton University on June 4, 1996, he proposed a \$1,500 tax credit for the first two years of college with the goal of providing 14 years of education to all American youth.<sup>24</sup>

Trying to steal the Republican thunder over family values and probably trying to protect his image as a family man in the face of charges of extramarital affairs, Clinton, in May 1996, recommended that cities enact curfews to keep youths under 17 off the streets after 8 P.M. on school nights. During the same period, he attacked tobacco companies for advertisements aimed at children and teenagers and supported the idea of uniforms for public school students.<sup>25</sup>

On June 23, 1996, Congressional Democrats announced their fall campaign theme to be "Family First" under which they placed their educational promises of tax deductions for educational expenses and expanded child-care credits. With talk of "good fathers like Bill Clinton and Al Gore," the Clinton's

reelection campaign picked up the same theme on June 24 at Al Gore's annual conference on family and work. At the conference, Bill Clinton called for an expansion of the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act to provide 24 hours of unpaid leave for family events, such as parent-teacher meetings.<sup>26</sup>

According to *The New York Times* political correspondent Alison Mitchell, the family theme was designed to appeal to a large segment of the population: families with children at home. "Within that group," Mitchell wrote, "are represented other groups of swing voters: independent-leaning suburban voters, working-class Reagan Democrats, and women. Analysts say the strategy has paid off in the polls."<sup>27</sup>

While Bill Clinton was supporting the tighter controls over the behavior of children and teenagers, Hillary Clinton campaigned for family and community responsibility for student behavior and school achievement.<sup>28</sup> Her book on these issues, *It Takes a Village*, was released early in 1996 to provide a background document for the campaign.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, the Republican nominee for the 1996 presidential election, Bob Dole, felt squeezed between the moderate and right-wing factions of the party. By the time of Dole's nomination, the education platform of the Republican Party was mainly under right-wing control. Ironically, the product of the education summit called by Republican George Bush in 1989, *Goals 2000*, was now supported by the Democratic Party. In 1994, Republican nominees for Congress agreed to enact, if elected, the policies outlined in their *Contract With America*. The *Contract With America* supported greater family control of education by giving parents the ability to choose their children's schools and reducing federal interference in schooling. No support was given to the national standards and testing. The educational role of the federal government according to the *Contract With America* should be limited to protecting the power of the family over schooling.<sup>30</sup>

In preparation for the 1996 campaign, Haley Barbour, Chairman of the Republican National Committee and of the National Policy Reform, outlined Republican goals in *Agenda for America: A Republican Direction for the Future*. Adopting the tone of the *Contract With America*, Barbour denounced *Goals 2000* as "a step further down the road of federal control of education."<sup>31</sup> After attacking the two teachers' unions for "schoolmarm rhetoric and strong-arm tactics,"<sup>32</sup> Barbour called for the abolishment of the Department of Education, parental choice of schools for their children, and more competition between schools. Clearly, the moderate Republican education agenda of national standards and testing was dead.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, the Republican nominee in 1996, Bob Dole, who is considered a moderate in the Republican Party, was without—as Bush was in 1992—a clearly formulated educational policy. During the early stages of the campaign, Dole's remarks on education were largely negative in the sense that they called for elimination of the Department of Education, opposed national standards, and opposed the schooling of the children of illegal immigrants.<sup>34</sup>

Republican conservatives were aware that they were not creating a positive image regarding education. "The conservatives clearly lost the message war on



education." worried Jim Herni, at the conservative think-tank, the Heritage Foundation, in April 1996. "Once he [Bob Dole] gets on top of the message war, then he can come out with some proposals."<sup>35</sup> Herni's comment reflected the growing Republican fear during the early stages of the election campaign that like George Bush in 1992 Bob Dole's media managers and spin doctors can create a clear, positive media image of their candidate.

Bill Clinton's political rise from "education governor" to "education president" highlights the important role educational issues can play in the life of a politician. Living in a society where education credentials are needed for income and job advancement, a politician needs to project a positive image regarding educational issues. Maybe Jeanne Allen, the president of the Center for Education Reform, is right. "Any candidate," she said, "has to convince the American people that they are truly concerned about education, that they understand the problems in education, and what they would do about it as president."<sup>36</sup>

## ADMINISTRATIVE POLITICIANS

Working for elected politicians are what I call administrative politicians. I am defining as *administrative politicians* those education officials whose tenure depends on the favor of elected politicians or on voter support. At the federal level, examples include the secretary and assistant secretaries of education. At the state level, it includes state superintendents of education (some state superintendents are appointed and others are elected). In local districts, school boards appoint most superintendents. Administrative politicians retain their positions by serving the interests of those responsible for putting them in office, and, usually, they share the same ideological outlook as the interests they serve.

At the federal level, the Department of Education and the position of Secretary of Education were created in the late 1970s during Jimmy Carter's administration. Before then, a commissioner of education headed the administrative branch in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. During the 1976 presidential campaign, Jimmy Carter promised the National Education Association (NEA), the larger of the two teachers' unions, to establish a Department of Education in return for support and campaign aid. The primary responsibility of the secretary of education is to represent the administration's viewpoint on educational matters before Congress and the public.

A variety of political forces impinge on the work of administrative politicians. After he left office, Terrel Bell, secretary of education during the first years of the Reagan administration, complained of constant pressure from what he called the "radical right" of the Republican party. "Among the members of the radical right," Bell wrote about his experience, "the thinking was that I and others like me were keeping Reagan from being Reagan." While in office, Bell campaigned for the conservative educational agenda of the Reagan administration, which included changing academic standards for