Prepared Remarks By Governor Jeb Bush
It is an honor to be holding our summit in this great American city. America stood by Boston when it confronted terrorism in April. And America will celebrate with Boston next year when it hosts the second biggest marathon in its history. Demand for the race is so great there are an additional 9,000 entries.

That’s how a brave city and resilient people respond to a cowardly act. This next Boston Marathon will be a 26-mile victory lap for the city and for the nation.

It will be a particular victory for Erika Brannock, a pre-school teacher who lost her left leg and almost her life in the bomb blasts.

She was there to support her mom, who ran in the race but never finished because of the attack. Both are returning.

Erika’s desire to get back in the classroom helped her through the ordeal. You can now find her at Davenport Pre-School, outside of Baltimore, working up to a fulltime schedule. She uses her rehabilitation as a teaching opportunity for her young students. They are getting an up-close lesson in courage and dealing with disabilities.

“They think it’s pretty cool that I roam around school on wheels,” she says. “I have fun with it. They ask me all the time – when are you getting the new leg.”

Researchers have spent years trying to figure out what makes an effective teacher. It’s not advanced degrees. It’s not certifications. It’s not spending 20 years on the job.

It’s whatever Erika has. So let’s dedicate this conference to great teachers, without whom no amount of education reform will be successful.

I’d like to open our 6th annual summit by asking a question.

A child enters kindergarten. His mother is a single-parent who works a minimum wage job. Perhaps he lives in the inner city or he is an immigrant learning English.
What do we expect of him?

Do we expect him to read by the third grade?

Do we expect him to learn fractions?

To write coherent sentences?

To graduate from high school equipped to attend college, begin a career or join the Armed Forces?

Or, as a society, do we look at his circumstances, dumb-down his expectations, and give his school an excuse not to make every effort to ensure he learns.

Do we just shuffle him through the system? Promote him out of third grade even if he can’t read. Let the fourth grade teacher deal with it, who in turn will let the fifth grade teacher deal with it and so on until he is so far behind nobody can deal with it.

Perhaps we sanction this under the guise of self-esteem and compassion because it sounds right and it relieves adults of their responsibilities but not their paychecks.

So, seriously what would you do – expect more of this boy or less?

If you would expect more, welcome. You’re in the right place.

When you boil down education reform to one guiding principle, it is this – every child can learn.

And so, we refuse to accept excuses that only set children up for failure and deny them the opportunity to achieve the American Dream.

That is immoral on an individual level and unsustainable on a national level if we plan to be world leaders in the 21st Century.
We set high expectations for every child, and we put in place the strategies to achieve them.

This is our mission, our labor of love, our reason for being here today and our focus every day – to re-organize education around students.

With us today are liberals and conservatives, politicians and educators, business leaders and philanthropists, teachers and parents. No one group or one person has all the answers. But by working together we certainly can find more of them.

If you are here for the first time, I implore you to take advantage of this opportunity.

Fill your heads with knowledge, your hearts with inspiration and then go home and become champions of children.

And when you do, heed the words of Iranetta Wright. She was a principal in Jacksonville, assigned to the lowest performing high school in the entire state of Florida.

A perennial F school, last year it earned a B and Wright transitioned to a job of helping other principals improve their schools. This was her advice to them: “You have to be relentless about it, and it’s not for the faint of heart.”

This also is my advice to you as we look back on a tough but successful year.

Those vested in the status quo in public education are fighting back harder than ever. And that’s hardly surprising.

We are taking on a $600 billion enterprise with more than 6 million employees. The old one-room school house has been turned into a government jobs programs where the number of employees has grown at four times the rate of students.
Public education has become a labyrinth of political, bureaucratic and union empires that depend on a captive population of students and minimal quality control.

Empires do not go quietly into the night.

They can’t defend their past and so they attack those trying to change the future. They have their talking points down, their cast of villains set and their allies in the media anxious to tell the tale.

But reform is maturing into a broad-based, bi-partisan movement, and so now joining conservatives on the target list is a rapidly growing number of Democrats.

I used to think what the unions said about me was bad, and then I heard what they were calling Rahm Emanuel during last year’s teachers’ strike.

After that I had to invite him to speak this year. Mayor Emanuel is relentless and most definitely he is not faint of heart. He is one of the many urban mayors in the reform movement.

They are hardly ideologues, hardly conservative and hardly in cahoots with so-called villainous corporate interests. They simply are on the front lines, dealing with decades of failure and fiscal recklessness by an education system dominated by union politics and enabled by pass-the-buck politicians.

Well, the buck finally had to stop.

And now these mayors must deal with massive budget shortfalls, not to mention dropouts roaming the streets. They see the juvenile detention centers filled with kids who never learned how to read.

In Washington DC, Detroit, Philadelphia and Chicago there are dozens of half-empty, failing schools being shut down, while parents line up for charters.
We have a glut of schools that parents don’t want and a dire shortage of those they do want.

And is it any wonder? For decades, our most vulnerable kids have fallen through the cracks and under the radar, with nary a word of protest from those who now can’t complain enough about the attempt to stop it.

Half of our Hispanic and African-American fourth graders are functionally illiterate. They are 2½ years behind white students.

Walk into a first grade classroom in Florida, Texas, California or New York, look at the faces, and tell me how much time we have to turn this around?

And the problem is much bigger than that.

Only a quarter of students taking the ACT this year qualified as college ready on all four sections.

Half the students entering community colleges require remediation.

About one-third of high school graduates fail the military entrance exam.

Our students’ performance on international assessments in reading, math and science can best be summed up as mediocre.

We worry about whether our kids have self-esteem. In Asia, they worry about whether their kids have a deep understanding of algebra and science.

How will America remain the most dominant nation on earth when we are a middling nation in the classroom?

The average age of our skilled manufacturing workers is 56, meaning the next few years should be a time of incredible opportunity for a new generation of machinists, operators, craft workers, distributors, draftsmen and technicians.
It is the public’s obligation to provide each child with the best education possible without regard to provider.

But where are they? Instead of workers lining up for high-paying jobs, the Manufacturing Institute is warning of a quote “worsening talent shortage that threatens the future effectiveness of the U.S. manufacturing industry.”

If trying to reverse this is a war on public education, I think it’s time to revisit the definition of public education.

My suggestion is this: It is the public’s obligation to provide each child with the best education possible without regard to provider.

There is no magic formula that makes kids smarter. We are not sending them to Hogwarts with Harry Potter.

Instead, we must rely on a variety of reforms, which in concert can produce strong grains.

We have to begin with early literacy. I do not understand the logic of promoting illiterate third graders into fourth grade.

It falls under the category of who do we think we are kidding? They cannot read the assignments, do the homework, prepare the reports or pass the tests.

And as a result, they are four times more likely to drop out.

Eighty-five percent of kids who enter the juvenile-justice system are functionally illiterate.

Seventy percent of prison inmates can’t read above the fourth-grade level.

Illiteracy destroys lives. And nothing focuses schools on early grade literacy more than retention policies backed by strong intervention policies and well trained teachers.

Next is school choice. We have the most diverse student population in history.
It defies common sense to corral them all in the same early 20th Century education model and expect them to thrive. It makes less sense when their neighborhood schools have a long track record of failure.

Bureaucracies are not designed to innovate. They don’t like competition. They don’t like accountability. What they like are no surprises and secure jobs.

And so we have an education system woefully behind the times. It has been isolated from the very forces that have driven American innovation and success for more than two centuries.

There should be more options across the board — charter schools, home schools, vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, and Education Savings Accounts – allowing parents to shop for a school that best meets their child’s needs.

Third we must look at the world our kids live in, and then the world they are educated in.

They come home from school, drop backpacks laden with 25 pounds of books and supplies, pick up their I-Pads, tap on an app, and off they go into the digital realm.

Bamm-Bamm from The Flintstones becomes Elroy Jetson.

We need to make education relevant to 21st Century kids and that means communicating with them on their terms as digital natives.

With digital education, kids can go to class anytime, anywhere, in their own style and at their own pace. Kids in rural Mississippi can take the same Advanced Placement courses available to students in Boston.

A math whiz can take six months to get through Algebra 2 while for other kids it might take 11 months.
Forty-five percent of college students now take an online course, a number that has doubled over five years. With growing pressure to bring down college tuition, and increasing competition for students, colleges are adapting fast to digital technology.

Shouldn’t we prepare our high school graduates for what is coming next? Yet in most states, protectionist laws retard the advancement of digital learning because it is a threat to union jobs.

This would be like newspapers being allowed to block bloggers or social media, or the Post Office being able to block e-mail.

We are letting the past thwart the future and this is putting kids at a disadvantage.

Fourth is accountability. The old model of education that made student achievement optional had predictable results.

The kids who were easy to teach got the best education. And the kids who were more difficult got the worst education.

You stop this by demanding all kids be taught. And then you measure results, sanction failure and reward success.

The best accountability system I know of is a simple A-F grading scale based on student learning. It gives parents an easy to understand snapshot of the state of learning at their child’s school.

Transparency should be encouraged, not feared. States can drive remarkable results through their grading formulas.

For example, in 2005, Florida began including the progress of students with disabilities in our grades. Ever since, Florida has led the nation in learning gains by students with disabilities, according to the Nation’s Report Card.

Schools respond to direction. Don’t be timid about giving it to them.
Next, we must upgrade the teaching profession. Great teachers matter a lot.

A child in the classroom of a great teacher gets a year and a half of learning in a year’s time.

A student in the classroom of an ineffective teacher, on the other hand, only gets half a year worth of learning.

So when school lets out in June, a student who had a great teacher walks out the door a full year ahead of a student who had an ineffective teacher.

Yet we pay both teachers the same.

If there were layoffs, and the ineffective teacher had been hired a day earlier, in most states, the great teacher would be sent packing.

If the great teacher got frustrated and quit, little if any effort would be made to keep her.

This may be a union-friendly model. It certainly is not a child-friendly model. It certainly is not a model designed to attract the best and brightest into the teaching profession.

Great teachers must be recognized and rewarded.

And that will happen if we eliminate tenure and evaluate and pay teachers based on their performance instead of how long they’ve been on the job or how many degrees they’ve accrued.

And lastly, high standards are a most basic element of reform.

Standards define what children are expected to learn over their school year, what they need to know to prepare them for success in each grade.

Ultimately, the quality of the standards determines whether a high school diploma is worth more than the paper it is printed on.
To compete with the rest of the world in the 21st Century, we must produce competitive high school graduates ready for college or meaningful careers.

That means we have to raise the bar to make sure the skills they are learning are aligned with what employers and college presidents expect high school graduates to know. These skills include critical thinking, problem solving and verifying work. The Common Core State Standards were designed based on these skills.

I understand there are those opposed to the standards. But what I want to hear from them is more than just opposition. I want to hear their solutions for the hodgepodge of dumbed-down state standards that have created group mediocrity in our schools.

Criticisms and conspiracy theories are easy attention grabbers.

Solutions are hard work. Be a problem solver.

And be decisive and resolute. How do we delay a parent’s right to send her child to a better school?

How do we delay efforts that better ensure children in first grade will be able to read by third grade?

Delay is a strategy designed for the comfort of adults, not the progress of children.

In 1984, the Florida education commissioner complained that the pace of reform was overwhelming the system.

“We need some more time to chew what we already have bitten off,” he said.

And 14 years later, when I became governor, Florida still was chewing. And our kids were at the bottom of the barrel in national academic rankings.
We abandoned delay as a strategy. We embraced full steam ahead. That made adults very uncomfortable. But in a few short years, Florida became a national leader in advancing the academic achievement of its children.

What we discovered is that kids have a remarkable ability to up their game. We just have to get adults on the same page. So don’t let them drag their feet. Act with urgency.

Use your principles as your compass.

Know policy. Be able to explain your positions. Stay focused on long term goals instead of short-term political calculation.

Look to the many successes that have come from reform.

By setting high standards and linking them to high school graduation, Massachusetts became a national leader in achievement. In 2011 its students were world beaters in math and science.

Florida’s focus on early literacy and ending social promotion in third grade elevated its fourth graders to second in the world

Students in Indianapolis charter schools are getting the equivalent of two extra months of reading and three extra months of math in a school year compared to their peers in traditional schools.

The Recovery School District in Louisiana took over that state’s worst schools, converted many to charters, and now leads the state in student learning gains.

Successful reform can prepare future rocket scientists for MIT, create world-class readers in a minority-majority 4th grade population, and elevate kids from our poorest neighborhoods.

Other states are taking note.
A QUALITY EDUCATION HELPS CURE POVERTY, DRUG ABUSE, CRIME AND IMPRISONMENT.

Arizona has become a leader in setting up education savings accounts for qualifying parents to use on things like private school tuition, tutoring and textbooks.

In Wisconsin, the birthplace of school choice, the state is expanding a voucher program to provide more options for low-income students. The state also has implemented a number of policies, beginning in kindergarten, to advance childhood literacy.

Arizona, Utah and New Mexico have begun grading schools to flag failure and recognize success.

In addition to grading schools, North Carolina recently began a statewide voucher program for low-income students, and so has Alabama.

And the Douglas County School Board – one of Colorado’s highest performing districts – is showing that school districts can lead the way. It has created the first suburban school voucher program in the nation, adopted a market-based pay system for teachers, and is developing higher academic standards and accompanying assessments. Four of the school board members are up for re-election this fall – and if the unions’ don’t get their way – these members will continue serving and the district focused on student learning.

There are many other examples and not enough time to cite them.

More students are learning and lives are being changed for the better.

And now let me close with this.

There was a beloved pediatric surgeon in Orlando named Dr. Ronald David. Diagnosed with terminal cancer, he spent his last years in the operating room, restoring the most fragile of lives.

When asked why he was so passionate about his job, he had this simple response: “I like the duration of the cure.”
Saving a young life produces the potential of a lifetime of purpose and meaning.

We need to think of education in those same terms.

I think of Josh, Eric and Chris of Merritt Island, Florida, who thanks to Florida’s Tax Credit Scholarship Program were able to attend the high school that best fit their learning needs. They graduated as co-valedictorians earlier this year. Chris is headed to University of Central Florida and aspires to one day teach. Eric and Josh have signed up to serve their country in the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps.

I think of Lakisha, whose 8-year-old son is part of Louisiana’s voucher program. “When I heard about this program,” she recently said, “I jumped on the chance to try something new for my son. I see the difference it has made in him from an academic standpoint and as an individual. He loves school now and is more outgoing. I hope to be able to get my other kids in the program because I know that it works.”

Education guarantees futures. When you teach a child to read, he or she will read for a lifetime.

I think of Caity, a young lady with autism whose Mom credits high expectations as helping her learn to turn her challenges into opportunities for growth. She recently wrote, “The high bar that was set taught her that through perseverance, self-discipline – sometimes slowing down and taking her time – she was able to accomplish her very best.”

When you prepare a child for college, he will support himself for a lifetime.

I am inspired by Hector Hernandez, a first generation American born to an immigrant mother. Hector was given the opportunity to work his way through Cristo Rey Jesuit, which challenged him with high expectations and tough teachers. The once shy 14-year-old, who found the thought of college intimidating, graduated from Brown University last year with a Fulbright scholarship!
A quality education helps cure poverty, drug abuse, crime and imprisonment.

This is a tough calling. It’s taxing. It’s politically risky. And it’s absolutely necessary.

So please maximize your time here. Ask questions. Get business cards and e-mail addresses. Follow-up. Go home and spread the word.

But most of all be resolute because meaningful futures hang in the balance for millions of children.

The duration of the cure is wonderful when we succeed. And the duration of the consequences is frightening when we fail.

Thank you, and God bless you.
All Kids Can Learn!

2013 National Summit on Education Reform

Prepared Remarks By Governor Jeb Bush

Foundation for Excellence in Education