

A 'Classic Conservative' Approach to Education: Jeb Bush on Accountability, Equity, and Managing Through Crises

Moriah Balingit: [00:00:02] Ok, so I start now. Hi, everyone, thank you so much for joining us on what I believe is Friday afternoon, realize that these are very strange times and I feel deeply honored that I have been tapped to for the very surreal experience of interviewing a former presidential candidate from my home office is definitely a first for me. And I also realize this is far from ideal, but I just checked the weather in Orlando and it's 90 degrees plus humidity.

Moriah Balingit: [00:00:28] So perhaps it's a blessing that we can all see each other but not smell each other. So before we begin a few housekeeping rules, please use the Chad box to your right to submit questions at any point throughout the session. An EWA staffer will be monitoring these questions and we'll facilitate the Q&A portion at the end of the session. While you also have a button to raise your hand. We would prefer that you not use that button, since we are only able to answer questions that are typed in the chat box to enter a question or comment, scroll down to the bottom of the chat section and look for the text entry box. If you are going to tweet about this, please use the #EWA20. Finally, a reminder that everything is on the record chats included.

Moriah Balingit: [00:01:15] So I know this conversation today is about equity and one of the ways that your organization and you as governor tried to promote equity was through vouchers. So I wanted to start with that. This is obviously a pretty heavy time for voucher advocates, the Espinosa decision and efforts to expand vouchers and voucher-like programs using pandemic funding. We saw in South Carolina that Henry McMaster wants to use as federal funding to have a tuition voucher program. But there's a really big question that is yet to be answered, and that is, should schools that receive taxpayer money through vouchers, ehsaas, or indirectly through tax credit scholarships be bound by the same civil rights laws and more specifically to the school that receives voucher money, for example, be allowed to bar openly gay students?

Jeb Bush: [00:02:03] So that's a that's a question that the Orlando Sentinel has been looking at pretty fervently over the last year and Florida since we have the largest

scholarship programs in the country, private scholarship programs, the corporate tax scholarship program has a one hundred and twenty thousand students, I believe, and then we have three other programs. And I think there has to be a way where we protect people's rights and also recognize that there is a question of religious liberty at stake as well. And I think there's a way to do that. I think you don't when you sign up to go to a Christian school, there ought to be total clarity about what the bylaws of the school are. They shouldn't try to hide anything. And parents can make the choice of whether they would want to go to that school or not. That's the least. I think these things need to be resolved, not in D.C., but they need to be resolved at the local level.

Moriah Balingit: [00:03:04] And so do you believe that the way that the program is functioning now is, to balance, that the schools that are in this voucher program should be permitted to discriminate against LGBT students?

Jeb Bush: [00:03:13] No, they're not. I didn't say that, did I? I said that they ought to be totally transparent about what their policies are, and parents have the right to make the choice of sending their kids to that school or teachers accept the policies as it relates to hiring. Now, the amount of so-called discrimination is very small, given the robust nature of these of these programs. It's not that the cases that were identified, at least by the ruling or some were not across the board. They were very few isolated cases. And the places where they didn't disclose these policies in advance, I think they need to change that.

Moriah Balingit: [00:03:53] So you believe that parents should be able to choose to send their child to a school that does that might have those discriminatory policies, but that's the parents choice in the end.

Jeb Bush: [00:04:00] It should be totally transparent and parents can make that choice for sure. And the bottom line is that as it relates to funding for these programs, they provide an education that the great majority of the parents are quite satisfied with, and they do it at a lower cost than the per student funding at the traditional public schools. And at this time, that's that's quite helpful because imagine if we didn't have these this private school option right now, these schools have been decimated by the pandemic,

for sure is a lot of there, these are low income students, by and large, that go to these schools, whether they're either going to be supported and continue to be able to have this private option or they're going to be thrown into the public school system, which they didn't want. So I think this is it's appropriate for governors like McMaster and DeSantis to provide some support for the private options that exist for parents today.

Moriah Balingit: [00:05:00] And when it comes to the coronavirus funding. I also wanted to talk about Rebecca Klein has done an incredible amount of reporting on this and has shown that this is actually something that's happening across the country. And part of the reason I wanted to ask that question is because people are hoping that these programs will expand. But when it comes to coronavirus aid, should states be supporting school choice in lieu of supporting public schools, that that could really need it right now.

Jeb Bush: [00:05:29] I think they need to do both. Our private options and charter options are now becoming pretty significant. And the reason they're large is that parents want them. I don't view public education as a system that needs to be supported at all costs. I think public education is educating students and parents need to be empowered to make these choices. And when they are public, schools get better. Florida is a pretty good example of this. We have the widest range of choices, both public and private. And we've seen over the last 20 years, we've seen significant gains. Now, we were at the bottom, near the bottom, but we've now moved up significantly because of our accountability programs and because parents are given other choices, which makes public schools have to respond to that. And they have and they've done a phenomenal job even under these difficult circumstances. Most of the districts you don't you don't have the problems that exist in Fairfax County and many affluent school districts around the country that couldn't go online, our our school districts, because they've trained for this and because they're more responsive to the needs of parents, I think have done a much better job.

Moriah Balingit: [00:06:40] And so I wanted to ask you too about Common Core, so you have that Common Core, which in many ways is an equity measure to ensure that all children get sort of the same baseline education. How do you square your support for

Common Core with your support for voucher schools where you know, which are not bound by the same curriculum requirements should voucher schools, for example, be free to teach students that evolution isn't real?

Jeb Bush: [00:07:04] I think giving parents these choices and making sure that they know what the options are is as American as apple pie. We apparently have a disagreement on this, but my views have been pretty, pretty well established. We created the first statewide voucher program and in 1999 and under the leadership of successive governors, we've expanded these programs and we've seen rising student achievement in public schools as well. So I don't have a problem with having a private option where parents are informed and can make an informed decision. And we also have high academic standards for, whether they're common or not is not as relevant as high, academic standards for the great majority of students that are going to our public schools.

Moriah Balingit: [00:07:52] And I wanted to move on now to the coronavirus response in schools, Republicans have often advocated, obviously, for federal government to play little league and sometimes no role in how schools are governed. And right now, we have a president and an education secretary that is, who are demanding that schools reopen, talking about punitive action against schools that don't. Senator Tom Cotton recently proposed a bill that would bar schools from teaching The New York Times 1619 project. And the White House and Congress are working on this coronavirus relief bill that would condition funding on schools reopening or have some mechanism along those lines. Should the president, the education secretary, be pushing schools to reopen in this fashion? And is this aligned with conservative values in your and your view.

Jeb Bush: [00:08:42] I'm a 10th Amendment guy. I think these decisions ought to be made at the state level. I've been pretty consistent about that as well. The conditions in Miami are very different than they are in rural north Florida or in Montana versus New York City. And I think having a one size fits all approach on opening would not be appropriate. Now, having said that, schools probably need to open the debate of this is you live in D.C., so you're you're unfortunately you're closer to the political infection,

which hits our country, which is everything's politicized, whether it's wearing a mask or not wearing a mask. Everything is put through a political lens as it relates to its impact on the president or or his opponents. And I just don't think that that's appropriate. And the other thing I say is it's the focus needs to be broader. We've seen it. We've seen an increase in domestic violence. We had two years of declining deaths of opioid overdoses. Now it's gone up this year. There's there is child abuse has gone up. There's mental health challenges of having kids and families quarantined forever. So the learning gains that have, or the drop in learning, has been significant as well by most accounts. And so I think we need to look at this in the broadest context possible of the social impacts, economic impacts and health impacts and open up safely.

Jeb Bush: [00:10:11] Maybe schools can can delay for several weeks or a month. Maybe they go in a hybrid format that ought to be determined by in a bottom up way, by school leaders in every school district in this country. And then the governors and legislatures can provide support for those strategies. I don't think D.C. is the place where this needs to be debated. Now, the role for Washington is an important one in that there needs to be financial support. If you are going to open up, you're going to have to have a significant investment in health and safety standards. You're going to be more PPE equipment. You're going to need, you're going to have to clean the schools in a very dramatically different way. You have to find new ways to be able to provide breakfast and lunch, particularly for low income students. And you have to deal with the learning gaps that have grown because we've been stuck at home since March. All of those things, there's appropriate role for Washington, which is to fund support, to be able to safely open up.

Moriah Balingit: [00:11:16] And I've certainly heard from a lot of people who have talked about and this is obviously something that we're looking at and writing about all of the collateral damage that is done by the quarantine, by the lockdown's, and by keeping kids out of school, which we know are far more than places where kids just get educated. Are there schools, in your view, or are there places that are not sufficiently taking the collateral damage into effect, in your view? I guess the suggestion that I hear from people who make this argument is that schools either don't know about that or don't sufficiently appreciate that.

Jeb Bush: [00:11:50] About the social cost of being quarantined? I think people, I know families know it because they're struggling with it and the economic hardship is completely uneven. So if you watch the talking heads on the cable news shows, which I occasionally do, I'm so happy live sports is back, to be honest with you. But in the interim, when there is no sports, I forced myself to watch this stuff. And those people, every one of those people has a job. Every one of those people can do their job, just as we're doing now remotely. There are a whole lot of people who can't do that. And to suggest that somehow they're incorrect to have a yearning for their children to go back to school so that they can go back to work, I think is the wrong headed approach here. What we ought to be doing is what are the conditions to create the safest possible environment. Recognizing that the world is not risk free, you have to accept some degree of risk in life. You cannot be paralyzed because of the additional cost, as we've just discussed, or so high. So I think there's a common sense way of doing this. And the first step is to stop the nonsense of politicizing everything on both sides. This is too important. The gaps in learning that are going to take place now. If we're stuck in place this fall and then there's going to be the siren call, we shouldn't have accountability for this year. It's not fair. You're going to see low income kids particularly fall way, way behind in the tragedy of that has long term social and cultural and economic impacts in our country that are very devastating.

Moriah Balingit: [00:13:28] So the schools that are saying that are hesitating to open, who have decided to go all virtual, for example, in the fall, do you think that they're being too conservative or are they, again, not sufficiently taking into account the social costs of being closed?

Jeb Bush: [00:13:43] Look, I just advocated local decision making from a bottom up approach. So it would be a little hypocritical to say to have an opinion. But I do think we need to be a lot more creative and inspirational about this. Out of all this disruption can come some incredible things. One thing that clearly has to be done, and I would love to see it be done and in one of these funding bills in Washington is an aspirational goal to eliminate the digital divide in this country so that if there is a pandemic and there is infection rates rise up and we have to go back to a quarantine kind of situation, that

children that don't have broadband access or devices to be able to learn will have access to that. I just see this whole debate is going to accelerate the social strife and the differences between classes in our country at a time when we need to be figuring out ways to make sure that people have a quality education and have a chance to rise up, we're creating policies that actually will create barriers for that to happen.

Moriah Balingit: [00:14:48] Well, and I know I mentioned this before we went on air, but tell me what you would be doing differently. And I'm going to give you two different scenarios since they're both positions that you've campaigned for. What would you be doing right now in terms of schools and education if you were in the Oval Office? And what would you be doing if you were still governor of Florida?

Jeb Bush: [00:15:07] I would not try to impose a one size fits all approach. I would make the case I would use the bully pulpit to communicate truthfully with humility, understanding we don't have all the facts. Sometimes the experts get it wrong, too, that we should try to build a consensus on what the strategy should be. The alternatives give people alternatives of what to do, give them hope, show some empathy, and encourage them to realize that there are broader considerations than just shut down or open. There's the economic costs are real and the social costs of quarantining are real, and the health costs of opening in a rash manner are also real. So I went through eight hurricanes and four tropical storms as governor. This is worse than that for sure. But in 16 months I learned a lot. You have to have a command of the facts. You have to be honest and truthful with people. You have to show empathy for their plight and you have to give them hope. You have to say, look, there's a rocky climb. We're all going to climb up together. But there's a lush green valley on the other side of this hill. Let's get on with it. And I don't know, I mean, governors and mayors, some of them have done a really good job watching from afar. Washington has not been a place that's been that inspirational.

Moriah Balingit: [00:16:27] Well, I wanted to ask specifically, too, I know that Governor DeSantis created this order at one point, or his education secretary did, that mandated that schools provide an in-person option. And like you said, the situation where you are is radically different than it is in rural Florida or in the panhandle. Should that federalism,

that idea, should it stretch all the way down to even governors should not be making these mandates?

Jeb Bush: [00:16:56] You know, I think yeah. I mean, look, we're in a highly dense, Miami-Dade County has the third largest school district in the country, it has an array of resources at their disposal and the ability and been a great superintendent that can mobilize support. And he knows what's best. And this ought to be done in concert, I'm sure, Governor DeSantis has talked to all the superintendents, at least those with scale, and so has Richard Corcoran. And you need to talk this stuff through, but I don't think we should be mandating when Miami-Dade opens the same way you'd be mandating LaFayette County, where the great capital is Mayo. And they may have one elementary school, one middle school, and may not even have a high school anymore. I don't know.

Moriah Balingit: [00:17:44] I have to say, I've never heard of Mayo, Florida.

Jeb Bush: [00:17:47] And it's not Lafayette, as you all say, up in Washington, it's Lafayette, Lafayette.

Moriah Balingit: [00:17:54] Ok, I'll remember that if I'm ever in Mayo. I guess we are trying to open the floor for questions here. So Kim I guess if you can send us some here,

Kim Clark: [00:18:06] OK. All right. Let's see. So we have a couple of questions. From Rebecca Klein says she says she found schools and voucher programs in Florida that push LGBTQ children to conversion therapy without advertising it. Would this be OK if they were transparent about this policy?

Jeb Bush: [00:18:29] No, it wouldn't. That's not their job. Their job is to educate.

Kim Clark: [00:18:37] Francie Diep would like to know what you think about colleges opening for in-person classes right now.

Jeb Bush: [00:18:44] Rewind the tape. It's a big challenge, very complex. I had a video conference with Mitch Daniels yesterday, and he's opening Purdue University is opening. They have found that they've given the option for personnel to to come on campus or not. And 58 percent or 60 percent of the of the employees are not going to go on campus, but can still continue to do their job. So there's a good example of a really good leader who has got buy-in from all of the constituencies in the university, students, parents, employees, professors, and is moving forward. And if there is a problem in that process, I can guarantee you that Mitch Daniels, being the kind of leader he is, will be adaptive and change to change those policies. The objective ought to be to open and to open safely. And if it can't be done in the traditional way, then find some kind of hybrid way to allow it to happen. And I think that's likely to happen more often than not in most parts of the country. I know that some of the universities are going completely online for the first semester. At least that's going to be tough.

Kim Clark: [00:20:02] Yeah, somebody asked, would you be open to vouchers or similar funds being made available to directly to families who are trying to create learning pods?

Jeb Bush: [00:20:12] Yeah, that's an I'm not an expert on learning pods, but I've been reading about it recently and I'm for parents having choices that meet the needs of their students. And obviously I'm not obsessed about whether it's a private option or a not for profit public option or a traditional public option. I think those are I've never felt like that should be the dividing line on education. But the adults in the system hate when guys like me say that they get all upset, they go nuts because their version of this is we need to protect the system that provides for my economic interests. So it's an interesting development where parents are concerned about the safety of their kids or trying to figure out ways to educate if there's a way to provide support for that in the hopefully temporary pandemic kind of environment that ought to be considered. And over the long term, certainly it ought to be considered. And some states are actually looking at that to use public moneys for that kind of education experience.

Kim Clark: [00:21:16] Ok, let's see, we have a question here. So if you believe that decision should be made at the local level, but do you think there are any overarching

requirements that the federal government or state government should apply to all, such as mandates for PPE, something about accountability or anything like that?

Jeb Bush: [00:21:38] I think. I don't think that the 50 governors of our country are idiots, so I think they're going to be concerned about the safety of the schools, maybe even more so than the bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., I mean, I just I don't I don't quite get the extent of these national mandates. We're a bottom up country. We do it right when we allow for the kind of flexibility that comes from the bottom up. So common sense would suggest that you're going to open up schools. You should do it in a safe way. And there ought to be some consideration for particularly older teachers that may have preexisting conditions. So if the evidence is pretty clear when forty five percent of all the deaths have taken place in nursing homes or assisted living facilities in the country, and the percentage of young people, young kids particularly, that has been infected is tiny compared to older people, then develop a strategy to protect them. And maybe what you could do is you could zoom the teacher in, that is for legitimate reasons, fearful of being in the school and have an unemployed college graduate manage the learning process with that teacher who is at home zooming in now that you can't mandate that from Washington. And that might not work in some parts of the country, but it could work in Miami. It could work in other places.

Kim Clark: [00:23:07] You've been a strong proponent of accountability. How do you think assessment and accountability should be approached this year?

Jeb Bush: [00:23:15] Well, we've already made the decision collectively that we had no test this year. So I feel bad for the teachers and principals that we're striving to improve their, you know, the number of kids that were reading or calculating math at grade level. And if you do it for two years in a row, the costs of that are going to be extraordinary. I think we should have accountability. And I think the test needs to be a better test than what was delivered when I was governor. And we have the capability of doing that. The tests should be administered. At the end of the year, it's an end of year tests, it ought to be administered closer to the end of the year. It ought to be diagnostic so that teachers can know how students did. And parents should be given ample, easy tools to be able to fix the weaknesses of their child in the summer and be given a set of things that they

could do to make sure their child gets back on track or stays on track. And then the next year's teacher ought to have the same diagnostic tools that are developed from an end of year assessment. That would be a much better system and I think if you don't have accountability, we see what happens.

Jeb Bush: [00:24:30] I mean, in the case of Florida on the NAEP tests, which you can't teach to, we were in 1997 on the fourth grade reading test, as I recall, we were twenty ninth out of thirty one states and then the NAEP was administered all 50 states. So 10 years later after we eliminate social promotion and created a really robust accountability system around our schools and our kids, we were six out of 50. And in fourth grade reading and like kind of results in math as well. And the reason for that was that we had real accountability and we had rewards for success and there was attention to improve, particularly for low income kids and kids of color. And the people get hurt the most by a system of no accountability are low income kids, African-American kids, Hispanic kids, kids with learning disabilities. And I think the progress that Florida has made and Mississippi is another great example of a state that's seeing significant gains is that you have accountability and you assess faithfully, but you also then develop strategies to make sure that you see rising student achievement. And that's the path forward, I think, for states that want to see improvement and see the achievement gap be narrowed.

Kim Clark: [00:25:50] It's great. You segued into the last question or, second the last question, penultimate question, which is right now we're in a sort of national reckoning with our racial history. And education plays a great role in some of these inequities. Can you talk about how your position might, what is your idea of how to resolve some of these racial inequities in education?

Jeb Bush: [00:26:14] Well, I think having a real, first of all, the systems in place in most states are, as it relates to funding, are not equal. Lower income students typically get less attention financially than kids in affluent neighborhoods. In Florida, we have big school districts, so there's a little bit less of that. But you could go to because these are collectively bargain teacher salaries, they're not school based, you could have big inequities there as well. We should eliminate that. Kids in low income communities are deserving of per student expenditures that are greater because the need is greater. And

so whether it's title one certainly helps in that regard. But that would be the first step on the long run is to make sure that there's equality of funding. And I think the other thing that I truly believe in is there should be high expectations for every kid. Look, life is tough for a lot of families, and you can easily see why people would say, well, it's not fair to have the same expectations for a low income kid that a kid that has lived a life of privilege. But if you create lower standards for kids that don't have the same access to the benefits of affluence, then you're going to get that result. And so I think we need to have high expectations for every child and then develop strategies to make sure that there's these gaps begin to narrow. In Florida, the thing I'm most proud of with my service as governor is that we began to shatter that mythology that some kids can learn, some kids can't, and it's continued on.

Jeb Bush: [00:28:02] There's a lot more that needs to be done. And then the other thing I'd say is that there needs to be much better data about tracking how students do, not just in the K-12 experience, but how they do after. What's, can they get it AA degree? Do they get a nationally recognized certificate that says that they're capable of being hired? Do they get a four year degree? What's the status of their being able to get a job? Most states don't have that. And so without that light shining on this issue, we just kind of shrug their shoulders and say it's just it's just not going to happen. You can't change the course of life. And that's such a tragedy because where we're moving, and the pandemic will accelerate this very fast, is we're moving to a completely different economy. The old order has been radically disrupted and we're going to see this play out in the next two or three years in the number of people that are going to be structurally unemployed because they never got the skills necessary for the next generation of jobs is pretty compelling. So focus on making learning kind of lifelong and focus on the fact that there should be equality of access to opportunity.

Kim Clark: [00:29:17] Ok, great. The last question is the chat box is abuzz about your artwork or can you tell us anything about the artist.

Jeb Bush: [00:29:28] It's a Romero Britto. Both of them are. That's a gift that Romero, who's a Brazilian American that's lived in Miami for many years, painted of my beautiful wife of forty six years right behind us. That's Maria Colomba Guernica de Bush.

Kim Clark: [00:29:42] That's correct. All right. Well, see, I do want to take us out there.

Jeb Bush: [00:29:48] Moriah's got a nice picture, too.

Moriah Balingit: [00:29:55] Ok, let's see here. Well, thank you, everybody. Here are three quick tips before you sign off. First follow up, if you have additional questions or want to connect with anybody you saw in the section, you can navigate over to the people tab at the top of your screen and click on their profile to see how to send a message. Second evaluation on the page you're looking at now. You should see a red button down and to the left. Please click on it. As soon as this is over, it will take less than a minute. So you will get an email early next week with an evaluation form for the entire event we completed. This was our first major event online. Your comments will help us a lot. Finally, what's next? You'll have lots of other great options over the next few hours, including sessions on rethinking police and schools, the growing impact of youth activism, and a session that offers training, a new fact checking tools and techniques. Just click on the agenda to check your options out. And thank you, everybody, for joining us. Thank you, guys.