

Stumping: Higher Education

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It is soggy and gray outside the Radisson Hotel in Columbia, South Carolina, as Richard M. "Dick" Riley shuffles past pelting raindrops to attend a predawn teacher recognition breakfast. Inside, though, the atmosphere is positively sunny as 500 teachers and business people scramble to their feet to give Riley, the former Governor of South Carolina, a standing ovation.

"Ladies and gentlemen," intones the welcoming speaker, "may I present the Education Governor."

Riley, 55, basks in such greetings often these days as he speaks to audiences across the nation about one of his favorite subjects: education reform. Though trained as a lawyer, this father of four and grandfather of two is an expert on the subject of education. It was Riley who, in 1984, spearheaded passage of the broadest educational reform legislation South Carolina had ever seen. A Rand Corporation study later called the reform package "the most comprehensive single piece of legislation" improving public education to come out of any state. It was Riley who believed so passionately that improving South Carolina's backward public school system was "the right thing to do" that he convinced South Carolina voters, among the poorest in the nation, to support a one-cent hike in the sales tax to fund the overhaul. It was Riley who engineered the sophisticated political campaign that persuaded state legislators to raise taxes to fund the \$210 million program, even though every committee chairman opposed it in the beginning. Today, Riley's Education Improvement Act (EIA) is so successful that a recent survey indicated 76 percent of South Carolinians would be willing to fork over yet another tax penny for education if the future reforms were as effective as those in 1984.

Riley's crusade for better education didn't end with his second gubernatorial term in 1987. Concerned last year that his successor and old political enemy, Carroll A. Campbell Jr., wasn't lobbying strenuously enough for full funding of education, Riley took up the cause once again. Subtly tweaking Campbell's commitment to education (the former conservative Republican Congressman voted for most of President Reagan's cuts in Federal education programs and was conspicuously silent about the EIA), Riley preached at conferences and meetings throughout South Carolina urging full funding for education. And when polls showed continued public support of such funding, Campbell suddenly got religion. His 1988 budget proposal put education at the top of the list.

Political observers rate the enormously popular Riley as the only Democrat with a chance to dislodge 85-year-old Republican Senator Strom Thurmond, the Senate's oldest member, from his seat in 1990. Or Riley might run for governor again in 1990—a race that would likely pit him against Campbell. It would be a bitter contest.

The two men, both natives of Greenville, South Carolina, have crossed swords before. When Riley, then a state senator, was working for peaceful integration of the schools in the early 1970s, Campbell led an anti-busing march from Greenville to Columbia, the state capital. Riley has never forgotten that.

The people who know Riley best are betting that he won't stay out of the political arena for long.

"Politics is his life," says Ann "Tunky" Riley, his wife of 30 years.

After earning a bachelor's degree with honors at Furman University in Greenville, Riley—whose father was an assistant U.S. Attorney under Franklin D. Roosevelt—entered law school at the University of South Carolina. Even then, politics was in his blood. "We used to have coffee [on campus] when we were dating," remembers his wife. "Then he'd go to his classes, and I'd go to mine. On the way out, he'd be shaking hands with everyone, whether he knew them or not."

Then disaster struck. In 1955, 22-year-old Dick Riley's doctors told him he had spondylitis, a degenerative, untreatable bone disease that cripples its victims. For 15 years, Riley suffered excruciating pain as bony-like deposits grew out of his vertebrae and fused. Fearing that he would become addicted to drugs, Riley refused all painkillers, including aspirin, and despite the pain, pressed back against his spine to prevent it from curling. In 1970, the disease finally ran its course and the pain stopped. Riley was left with a rigid spine that makes him lean forward constantly. Friends and former aides say that his devastating illness gave Riley special compassion for the handicapped and the down-and-out. It also gave him a mental discipline and tenacity that have characterized him ever since.

Elected to the South Carolina House in 1963 and to the state Senate in 1967, Riley became the leader of the "Young Turks," quietly but doggedly battling the establishment and playing a key role in passing home rule, judicial reform, reapportionment, and school financing legislation. In 1978, he was elected governor. Riley kept busy during his first term reforming the controversial state utilities commission and ending South Carolina's status as a dumping ground for the country's nuclear waste. Then in 1980, Riley persuaded the electorate to approve a constitutional amendment allowing the South Carolina Governor to succeed himself. Two years later, Riley was reelected with 70 percent of the vote, becoming the first governor in modern South Carolina history to serve a second consecutive term.

Early in 1983, Riley introduced a reform package that included education. This time, not enough legislators voted his way; the bill was defeated overwhelmingly. By autumn, he was determined to try again. But now it would be a full-court press—a referendum, in effect, with education improvement as the only issue on the ballot.

Riley recruited a broad coalition of business leaders, educators, and civic leaders to serve on two blue-ribbon committees that wrote the provisions and funding proposals that became South Carolina's Education Improvement Act. Various local chambers of commerce appointed task forces or work groups to help shape educational reforms. A local public relations firm was hired to develop a strategy for marketing the education campaign. Supporters contributed \$100,000 to pay for EIA television ads that blanketed the state. Twenty company presidents were persuaded to endorse the EIA package; some taped a video saying they would not recommend new investments in South Carolina unless the educational reform package was enacted. These messages were shared with legislators at small receptions during the legislative session.

Riley stumped the state vigorously that fall, selling his educational reform package. At rallies in school auditoriums across the state, Riley ticked off the grim statistics: More than one-third of South Carolina's first graders could not pass the state's basic skills test; South Carolina high schoolers placed near the bottom in nationwide Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores; and the state ranked

49th out of the 50 states in spending per pupil. "If we can't be the first in anything else," Riley exhorted the people who attended his pro-education reform rallies, "let's be the first in the first grade, where it counts."

Riley's staff set up a toll-free number so citizens could phone in their ideas. People who called in were encouraged to write and call their representatives and senators to demand passage of the EIA. Slowly, legislative support for the EIA grew. Then-Representative John D. Bradley III, a conservative Republican from Charleston, listened to Riley's proposals for incentive pay programs for teachers, principals, and schools, tougher attendance policies, remedial and compensatory programs, and high school exit exams. "He made sense," Bradley says today. "It was the single most conservative, sound approach to education that I have seen in my lifetime." Bradley climbed onto the EIA bandwagon, but it was a lonely perch for a while. No fellow Republicans joined him for five long months.

During the EIA battle, then-Texas Governor Mark White presented Riley with a pair of cowboy boots as a gift. Riley promptly vowed that his boots would stay on until the Legislature passed the EIA. "I wore them to work, to church, to formal functions," remembers Riley. "Everybody would check to see if I had them on." Several weeks later, the Legislature finally approved the EIA, and Riley removed his boots.

Now in its fourth year, the EIA has had dramatic results:

- Real test scores are up in all basic skills (reading, math, and writing in all grades). The magnitude of the gains is two to five times greater than gains prior to reform.
- Truancy is down 30 percent; so is daily absenteeism. Collectively, South Carolina students now attend school almost 15 million hours longer than before the reforms.
- SAT score gains have led the nation the last four years.
- An increasing percentage of South Carolina's high school graduates are entering college and passing more freshman honors courses. Advanced Placement enrollment in high schools has almost tripled since the EIA was passed.

A statewide committee continues to monitor the EIA, by law providing an annual report on "what the penny is buying for South Carolina." Among other things, the increase in the sale tax pays for teacher raises, remedial and compensatory programs aimed at keeping potential dropouts in school and cash bonuses to the best teacher and to schools considered to be the most improved. Since leaving office, Riley has divided his time between teaching college and practicing law with a prestigious South Carolina law firm. The EIA's smashing success has made Riley a sought-after speaker. He receives 30 to 40 invitations each month asking him to speak on educational reform (infant mortality is another of his pet causes), and he accepts more than half. Last year, Riley was asked to head up the Commission for Educational Quality of the Southern Regional Education Board, an Atlanta-based organization of 15 states whose goal is to improve educational opportunities in the South. "I asked Governor Riley to chair our commission," says SREB President Winfred L. Goodwin. "To me, Dick Riley symbolizes the best in gubernatorial leadership in terms of education."

South Carolina voters seem to feel that way, too. John Bradley tells about an incident that happened in late 1984, shortly after the EIA was finally approved. Bradley and his wife went with Riley and his wife to a Willie Nelson concert. As Riley walked toward his seat, a scruffy-looking man wearing an old cap darted toward the Governor, whose startled security guards hustled the man away. A few

minutes later, one of the guards approached Riley and sheepishly handed him a note that the shabby man had been trying to give the Governor. "Thank you for trying to help my children with the penny," the note read.