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Clinton passes legislation to aid education expenses

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Clinton signed legislation Thursday giving states greater freedom in spending federal education dollars — a modest achievement by Republicans and Democrats that was accorded a Rose Garden ceremony to showcase possibilities for bipartisanship.

"You know, there have been days in the last few years when I'm not sure we could have gotten this many members of Congress to agree that today is Thursday," Clinton joked as he surveyed the dozen or more lawmakers witnessing his enactment of the "Ed-Flex" bill.

"I hope now we're getting off to a good start, and we'll keep on doing this," Clinton said.

In a similar spirit, Rep. Michael Castle, R-Del., said, "I hope this is simply the first accomplishment. ... We must continue along this path" of working together to improve schools.

Remarks from both sides of the aisle, however, suggested that was no sure thing.

The Education Flexibility Partnership Act allows all states to receive waivers of certain federal education requirements in order to improve school and student performance.

But Clinton, before painstakingly marking his signature on the bill with more than a dozen pens that would become the lawmakers' souvenirs, threatened to undo the legislation if it didn't

work the way Republican sponsors promised.

If states and school districts did not use their new flexibility to produce measurable results, Clinton said, "and the money's being misspent under this law, then we'll revert to another system."

"I hope now we're getting off to a good start, and we'll keep doing this."



— PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON

He pressed the GOP majority in Congress to take up his own education agenda: massive new federal funds for hiring teachers, modernizing and building schools, and testing students against national standards.

Republicans, in turn, criticized the Democrats' agenda as a "one-size-fits-all" approach to fixing the nation's schools.

"I urge President Clinton and his colleagues in Congress to help us to eliminate the federal middleman in Washington and empower our teachers and parents to improve public education at the local level," Oklahoma Rep. J.C. Watts Jr., chairman of the House Republican Confer-

ence, said in a statement.

Ed-Flex, which was the first substantive bill to emerge from the post-impeachment Congress, was approved overwhelmingly in the House and Senate last week. Its passage was cheered by Republicans who advocate allowing more local authority over nearly \$11 billion in education spending this fiscal year.

The legislation expands to all 50 states and the District of Columbia a program established in 1994 that freed 12 states and school districts from some rules for obtaining federal funds and let them establish their own programs under which they would be accountable for academic results.

It authorizes the Education Secretary to deny Ed-Flex status to states that fail to develop strict standards and assessments for measuring the progress of students and school districts.

Clinton called for an expansion of the Ed-Flex pilot program last year in a speech to the National Governors' Association.

To stave off a threatened presidential veto, Republicans had to give up a provision allowing a portion of the \$1.2 billion in this year's budget for Clinton's new teacher program to be used for special education needs. Instead, the bill says school districts with class sizes of 18 or fewer students may join with other districts to use the money for teacher training.

Mayoral elections heat up across Texas

DALLAS (AP) — Four years after Ron Kirk fought his way through a 10-candidate field to become Dallas' first black mayor, he faces two lightly regarded challengers Saturday in his bid for a second term.

Kirk is running against immigration lawyer and political novice Margaret A. Donnelly and perennial candidate Billy Jack Ludwig.

During his first term, Kirk pushed through referendums to build a sports arena and develop an area along the Trinity River near downtown. Each passed by fewer than 2,000 votes.

Kirk, a lawyer and former Texas secretary of state, said he is optimistic that voters "aren't looking for a lot of change."

"There is overwhelmingly positive feeling about the direction the city is going," he said. "We've had two controversial referendums. People like that I tell them what I'm going to try to do and then go out and do that."

Kirk said he will focus his second term on fixing streets, keeping the city safe and promoting economic development in south Dallas, the poorest part of town. Critics argue he has focused on grand projects that exist only in architectural drawings while ignoring crumbling roads and poor schools.

"Too many of our resources are being directed to economic development and not enough to education," Ms. Donnelly said. "Recreation centers in Dallas are closing between noon and 2 p.m. on Saturdays, just when they're most desperately needed."

Ludwig, who said he operates a direct-marketing company, accuses Kirk of being a tool of wealthy interests, including Tom Hicks and Ross Perot Jr., whose pro hockey and basketball teams will play in the new arena.

"I'm running to get rid of the downtown group, the billionaires that control the mayor," Ludwig said, complaining that Hicks and Perot should be paying the city's \$125 million share of the arena project.

Kirk expects to spend \$500,000 on the campaign — much more than his opponents but only half of what he spent in 1995.

Also Saturday, voters in the Dallas neighborhood of Oak Cliff will decide whether to re-elect longtime Councilman Al Lipscomb, who has been indicted on federal bribery-related charges involving payments from a taxi-company owner. The 73-year-old Lipscomb goes on trial May 17.

Mayoral elections will also be held Saturday in San Antonio, El Paso and Brownsville.

San Antonio Mayor Howard Parsley's second two-year term against three candidates: Tony Garza, Joseph Cisneros, Eloy Centeno and Louis Perez, his nearest competitor. Antonio Ramirez has championed an annexation to officials in Juarez, Mexico, to help underage Americans. Mexico's legislative is 18.

In Brownsville, Mayor Henry Cisneros is seeking a third term against Blanca Soto, wife of a federal judge.

Gonzalez' biggest campaign opponent is Maurice Taylor, the chairman of Transnational Inc., which received a \$300 million package to build a plant in Brownsville. Vela has touted her experience as a city Board chairwoman, housewife and mother.

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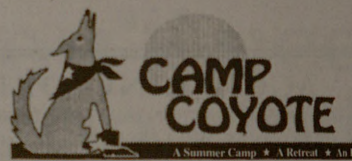
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