

A Governor's Crusade

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Governor James B. Hunt Jr. often greets visitors to his Capitol office sporting one of his dozen "Save the Children" ties—multihued neckwear from the United Nations that features smiling children of all races and colors. "Here in North Carolina," he jokes, "we call 'em Smart Start ties."

Smart Start is the 58-year-old governor's cherished initiative to help disadvantaged youngsters from birth to age 6 catch up with other children before they start school. And it is the popular linchpin of a "crusade for public education" that he is waging during his third term as governor. "If you get [early childhood education] right," Hunt maintains, "everything else... is going to work."

Jim Hunt burst onto the North Carolina political scene in 1972 when he was elected lieutenant governor. Hard-driving, ambitious, savvy, and fiercely partisan, the young Democrat built an unrivaled political machine, earning a reputation as moderate on race issues, conservative in fiscal matters, and friendly to business.

First elected governor in 1976 and reelected in 1980, Hunt became known as an "education governor"—one of a handful of centrist Southern chief executives who instituted significant educational reforms in their states in the early 1980s. Several of these governors went on to bigger things: Bill Clinton of Arkansas was elected President; Richard Riley of South Carolina became Clinton's Secretary of Education; Lamar Alexander of Tennessee became Secretary of Education under George Bush and is currently a candidate for the 1996 Republican Presidential nomination.

Hunt also grabbed for the national brass ring but missed, narrowly losing a bruising battle for the U.S. Senate in 1984 against Republican Jesse Helms. Then, after an eight-year hiatus in private law practice, Hunt comfortably won his third term as governor in 1992. Today, a seemingly gentler, more reflective Hunt is back in the governor's mansion and education is still his mantra.

The "flashy pompadour," as one veteran political reporter described it, is gone, and the dark hair has turned silvery. But Jim Hunt's focus—that education is economic development—hasn't wavered. "He never veers from education and economic development. They were his issues in the 1970s and 1980s, and they're his issues today," says John N. Dornan, president of the Public School Forum of North Carolina, an independent watchdog group whose goal is to improve education in North Carolina.

Hunt claims, in fact, that he ran for a third term in order to continue the fight for improved public education. "I wasn't interested in being governor just to be governor," he says. "[In the 1990s] we weren't making the changes we needed to make, and we didn't have anybody on the horizon who understood what they needed to be."

Hunt grew up on a ranch in North Carolina's Wilson County where he and his wife, Carolyn, now raise beef cattle. After earning bachelor's and master's degrees at North Carolina State University, Hunt graduated from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill School of Law in 1964. After passing the North Carolina bar exam, Hunt practiced law for six years and was elected president of the North Carolina Young Democrats in 1968.

Four years later, Hunt became lieutenant governor and launched what has become a 23-year holy war for public education. He can boast about a number of successes:

- Making all-day, free public kindergarten available to every child in the state;
- Putting teaching assistants in every first-, second-, and third-grade classroom for intensive reading instruction;
- Boosting teacher salaries (especially during election years, critics point out), reducing class size, and raising (average) SAT scores from 814 in 1978 to 860 in 1994 (the national average in 1994 was 902);
- Opening the North Carolina School for Science and Mathematics for gifted students;
- Requiring potential high school graduates to pass a minimum competency test in reading and math, and increasing the requirements for graduation;
- Founding the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching, a retreat where teachers can go for a week of renewal and professional development in the summertime.

But there have been disappointments too. Hunt's Basic Education Program was originally passed in 1985, after the governor had left office, but it was the state's most expensive school reform package ever and has never been fully funded. Subsequent measures to increase autonomy in individual schools haven't made much difference in student achievement levels. And many educational measurements remain dismal: North Carolina's SAT scores remain 48th in the nation, teacher salaries are 39th, and per pupil expenditures for elementary and secondary public schools rank 35th. In addition, roughly 40 percent of North Carolina's adult population remains functionally illiterate.

"We're still not closing the gap nearly enough," admits Tom Houlihan, a former school superintendent who is Hunt's chief education adviser. Adds State Representative Anne Barnes, a former Democratic chairperson of the House Education Committee: "If the governor could work a miracle on this, he would. If I could work a miracle, I would. But it's a question of trying all the things we can and staying the course." She continues: "We're making progress, but we started farther behind so we have farther to go. It takes time."

Hunt's frustration at the slow pace, at best, and the failure, at worst, of some of his school initiatives drove him to seek new ways to improve education in his poor, conservative state. And familiarity with recent studies indicating that the brain's pathways are largely set by about age 2 convinced him that early intervention was key: "I finally figured out that we have to do something about these kids *before* they come to school," says Hunt. "We can't do more of the same."

That "something" is Smart Start, a day care, health, and education program that targets disadvantaged families; poor single mothers and their youngsters are the primary beneficiaries. Launched in 1993, the program is now under way in 32 of the state's 100 counties. Funded to the tune of \$47.7 million by the state and supplemented by private contributions, Smart Start relies largely on innovative local public-private partnerships to decide how best to meet local children's needs. Business executive Phillip J. Kirk Jr., president of the North Carolina Citizens for Business and Industry, calls Smart Start a "dropout prevention program that, in the long run, will increase the graduation rate and reduce welfare dependency."

Smart Start is dear to the governor's heart, and he sings its praises unceasingly. "Jim Hunt will

embrace an idea and bird-dog it to death," says the Public School Forum's John Dornan. "Smart Start is one of these. You won't see him at a reception or in his office without hearing an impassioned speech about Smart Start."

But Smart Start is pricey: Projections are that it will cost upward of \$250 million a year if extended to all 100 counties. Political observers say Hunt will have a fight on his hands to expand the program, particularly since the state's Republican-dominated House of Representatives wants to freeze funding until the program's first two years are evaluated.

Hunt has other priorities for his third term as well. He has appointed a Standards and Accountability Commission to set tough new standards in all subject areas for high school students; by the year 2000, passing the test will be a graduation requirement. Hunt has also made teacher input a priority for education reform, and to this end has established a Teacher Advisory Committee, a 15-member group that meets at least four times a year with the governor. Heading the committee is Karen Garr, a former schoolteacher who now serves as the governor's full-time Teacher Advocate. "I think I'm the only one in the country," says Garr. "I'm the connection between the governor and the teachers of North Carolina."

Last summer, Garr and the Teacher Advisory Committee sponsored 35 town meetings across the state to get teachers' views on a variety of topics. One outcome: The governor instructed the State Board of Education to enforce state law mandating one daily duty-free period to give teachers at least some planning time to prepare lessons or consult with colleagues.

Hunt also leads the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, a panel of national business and education leaders looking for the best ways to help teachers meet the needs of tomorrow's students. The commission, which held its first meeting in November, is funded by the Carnegie Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation.

In addition, Hunt remains head cheerleader for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), which encourages voluntary nationally standardized certification for classroom teachers. Hunt helped to found NBPTS in 1987 and has chaired the board since its inception. His ardent backing of the idea to professionalize teaching helped convince the North Carolina legislature to allocate funds to pay the \$975 exam fee for teachers who complete the rigorous certification program. North Carolina currently has more teachers than any other state-- about 130-- who are candidates for the newly established certification program. And although several other states are considering similar measures, North Carolina is currently the only state that provides a raise (a 4 percent hike) for teachers who successfully complete the program.

Critics predict that one likely result of the program is that the nationally certified teachers will be lured to wealthier districts or to those private schools that can afford to pay more, thus widening the gap between rich and poor schools. Hunt, however, dismisses this possibility. "When it becomes clear that board-certified teachers are so good and so helpful to the children, I think the citizens will demand that they have their share of them." Besides, he adds, the state or local school districts could provide these excellent teachers a special stipend to encourage them to stay in the needier districts.

Always one to practice what he preaches, Hunt volunteers weekly at Raleigh-area schools, a priority he established back in 1977. During his first term as governor, Hunt read stories to first-and second-graders and volunteered at a remedial mathematics lab at a Raleigh high school. During his second

term, Hunt got involved in his Partners in the Schools Program, tutoring high-risk kids and helping them find ways to stay in school.

This year his pupil is Karim, a 12-year-old seventh-grader. Once a week Hunt goes quietly to Karim's middle school for an hour-long one-on-one tutoring session. (The governor has shunned media publicity during these outings, fearful that it would embarrass his student and that his tutoring would be viewed as a media ploy.) "I help him with his homework," Hunt says, "but it's really a time of nurturing and stimulating and supporting and encouraging. I'll bet that I tell him a hundred times during that hour how well he's doing. I find something to praise him about—even if it's how he dots his I's." Sometime soon, Hunt has promised Karim a ride in the state helicopter.

Hunt plans to tape a series of public-service announcements aired over North Carolina radio stations to urge more adults to sign up for the governor's volunteer-driven effort to provide after-school activities for at-risk youngsters. "What a lot of these kids need is a friend," he says, "somebody to encourage them, build expectations, and talk about a future they can have."

For his part, the governor wants four more years to push his education initiatives and says he plans to run for reelection in 1996. If the polls are any indication, he'll win handily. (A recent *Raleigh News & Observer* survey gave the governor a 71 percent approval rating.) "I have five wonderful grandchildren," he says. "I think about them a lot. [By the year 2000], I want to see every child in North Carolina coming to school ready to learn."