Riley calls for voluntary preschool across Alabama

8.14.07
Sunday, August 12, 2007
CHARLES J. DEAN
News staff writer

POINT CLEAR - Gov. Bob Riley told business leaders here Saturday he will push for voluntary preschool for all Alabama youngsters as the next priority to move state schools forward.

U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby told the same group he doesn't know what the future holds for the United States in Iraq but that mistakes have been made in the way the war has been conducted.

And two-year college Chancellor Bradley Byrne told business leaders that under his watch all community college employees from presidents on down will obey the law or find themselves looking for other jobs.

The three state leaders, all Republicans and all facing hot-button topics in Montgomery and Washington, spoke Saturday at the 20th annual governmental affairs conference of the influential Business Council of Alabama. The event was at the Grand Hotel Marriott Resort on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay.

Riley led off the conference, telling 200-plus business leaders that while Alabama's economy has never been better, the state must embrace change in how it educates its children, how it maintains its roads and bridges, and how its politicians behave.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to have to build a pre-K program that allows our children to have as much of the advantages as every other state," Riley told the group.

Riley said Alabama has made progress in how it teaches students to read, write and do math and now is the time to begin investing in pre-kindergarten schooling.

"Unless we allow them to have that early education, we will never achieve that level of greatness our children deserve," Riley said.

State school Superintendent Joe Morton, a long-time supporter of pre-K, said a fully implemented program would cost hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

Riley also called on the Legislature - there were many lawmakers in the audience Saturday - to begin thinking about new ways to build and maintain state highways and roads. Riley said he wants the state to begin looking at alternative solutions such as toll roads and toll bridges, partnerships of private companies and the state for building roads, and an expansion of roads and bridges built and operated by private builders.

Riley again called on legislators to pass ethics reforms such as banning PAC-to-PAC transfers that make it almost impossible to tell who is giving large amounts of money to politicians.

Shelby told the group it's only natural Americans have grown weary of the war in Iraqi with no end in sight. He pointed out that past wars also have resulted in voter unhappiness, even World War II; in 1942 voters turned out at the polls and defeated a large number of Democrats in the House and Senate.

"People don't like war. Nobody does. ... We had initial success in Iraq but we've had a lot of mistakes made there. But we have not been defeated on the battlefield," he said.

Shelby said the war is hovering over the country while it awaits a mid-September report from commanders on the ground on how well the surge in U.S. troops has gone.

He also said, "The Iraqi government has got to step up to the plate" to bring warring ethnic factions together.

One standard to meet:

Byrne, a former Baldwin County senator whom Riley recommended and the state board approved as chancellor in May, got the biggest hand of the day when he said the troubled two-year college system must change how it operates.

Byrne warned that the ongoing state and federal investigations of the two-year system are far from over. "There is more bad news to come," Byrne said. "If we sit back and pretend there are not problems we have to fix, or somehow the prosecutors are going to fix them all for us, we are kidding ourselves."

Byrne said there will be one standard for behavior of all employees in the system. "We have to make sure everybody in the system understands this, that we have an obligation to obey the laws of this country, the laws of this state, and the policies of the state board of education. And anybody in our system who is not willing to live up to that standard is to get another job."

E-mail: cdean@bhamnews.com

© 2007 The Birmingham News
© 2007 al.com All Rights Reserved.

Click here for pdf.