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Business Coalition Gets Behind Effort on Raising America's Competitive Curve

By Alex Wayne, CQ Staff

With President Bush's poll numbers mired in the 30s and his administration focused on the war in Iraq, a coalition of business groups is stepping up efforts to push the administration's latest domestic policy proposal through Congress: increased spending on basic scientific research and math and science education.

Bush has given considerably less personal attention to what he calls the "American Competitiveness Initiative" than he did to an overhaul of Social Security, the last major domestic policy proposal where business groups joined in, and the result has been virtually no action by Congress.

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[Graduates in Math, Science Little Changed Since 1990](#)

Last year, the Business Roundtable and other groups backed Bush's effort to create individual investment accounts in Social Security, an idea that flopped in the face of united Democratic opposition.

Business at least doesn't face that problem this time around: Democrats are as enthusiastic about increasing spending on research and math and science education as Bush. The problem is Republicans, and a focus on spending constraint that has left appropriators complaining they don't have enough money for existing education and research programs, much less new ones.

The House Science Committee approved a pair of bills ([HR 5356](#), [HR 5358](#)) on June 7 that would authorize much of Bush's competitiveness agenda. The bills authorize — but do not fund — new grants for scientific research and new training programs for math and science teachers.

"The will to improve our science and math education in the U.S. is there, and these bills will get us closer to that end," said a House Democratic aide. "Whether there's the push from the majority to make it happen is another question."

The proposal, which the business groups call "Tapping America's Potential," is moving slowly in Congress. So far, just one piece — new grants for college students majoring in math, science and engineering fields — has become law ([PL 109-171](#)).

Nerf-Tossing Robots

Several top American companies, including Apple, IBM, General Motors Corp. and ExxonMobil Corp., will demonstrate for lawmakers at the Capitol how basic scientific research funded by the government can turn into commercially successful products. The science and technology fair is scheduled Tuesday.

“The reason we’re having this fair . . . is to keep the pressure on, to make sure the calendar and the issues coming to the floor don’t crowd out attention to the [competitiveness initiative] this year,” said Susan L. Traiman, director of public policy for the Business Roundtable, which represents CEOs of the some of the nation’s largest companies.

The Roundtable is organizing the fair, and Traiman spent part of her day June 23 trying to figure out how to get a robot that throws Nerf balls through security at the Rayburn House Office Building.

Time to Worry Again

Business lobbyists were pushing the idea even before Bush spoke up.

Last spring, Joseph M. Tucci, chief executive officer of EMC Corp., a data-storage company, asked Business Roundtable lobbyists to try to get the rest of the Washington business lobby to agree on a few math and science proposals they could offer Congress together. Tucci felt that too many separate business groups had issued their own reports, confusing the issue, Traiman said.

So Traiman started contacting her colleagues at groups like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Minority Business Roundtable, TechNet and several major corporations. The result: a report warning — as Bush would in February — that the United States needed to invest more in basic scientific research, training teachers and convincing kids to become scientists and engineers, lest it fall behind formerly developing Asian nations.

Traiman has some experience trying to keep the nation ahead of supposed Asian competitors: She served on the staff of a Reagan administration commission that, in 1983, issued a report titled “A Nation at Risk,” warning of a competitive threat from Japan.

The specter of a foreign country full of math and science savants, ready to produce everything from cars to televisions better than Americans, prompted “a wave of reform” in American education, Traiman recalls, including increased graduation requirements and teacher pay.

Never mind that Japan Inc. never quite emerged as the economic behemoth President Reagan feared. It’s time to worry again, according to Big Business and another Republican president, as well as a host of scientists, economists and demographers.

“We could put our heads in the sand and say, ‘this will turn out the same way,’ ” Traiman said. “But the indicators now are different. When we look over the horizon, and we look at how fast these countries are jumping from essentially Third World economies into the

21st century, and the way that communications have changed, where companies can hire talent wherever it is in the world, people can work in different time zones, on different continents, the challenge for the United States is different and one that we have to address.”

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