

By Lori Stahl

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Former first lady [Laura Bush](#) is expected to unveil a public school reform program today that will be the first large-scale policy initiative of the [George W. Bush Institute](#) at [SMU](#).

The plan involves a new collaboration of educators, nonprofits and businesses aimed at improving the performance of public school students by altering the role of principals.

The Bush Institute, the policy-making arm of the Presidential Library Center planned for Southern Methodist University, aims to have half the country's public school principals trained under a new curriculum over the next 10 years.

"It is meant to be a very large project," said James Glassman, the institute's executive director. "We want to expand or augment the pipeline for those who will consider becoming principals."

The idea is to develop a fast track into schools for experienced or promising leaders who don't necessarily have training as educators – such as retired military personnel.

After a brief training period, the new recruits would be assigned to campuses where they would have expanded powers to run the schools.

Bush is scheduled to reveal details at a Dallas high school today, along with officials from [AT&T](#), which will provide initial funding of \$1 million to launch the Alliance to Reform Educational

Leadership.

The launch comes about five weeks before the scheduled debut of former President George W. Bush's memoir on Nov. 9. The following week, groundbreaking will begin on the presidential library center at SMU. It is scheduled for completion in 2013.

This week's education initiative is the most ambitious and substantive effort to come from the Bush camp since the former president left the [White House](#) in January 2009.

The former first lady is expected to cast the new initiative as an extension of Bush's long-standing interest in education policy.

The new program calls for a network of pilot sites around the country where academic research produces a "game-changing model" that leads to a "national performance based certification program" for principals.

The [Dallas Independent School District](#) has signed on to the plan, along with the [Plano](#) and Fort Worth school districts, Bush officials said. SMU and the [University of Texas at Dallas](#) are also named as partners.

Similar alliances are being formed in [Denver](#) , [St. Louis](#) and [Indianapolis](#) .

Nonprofits such as [Teach for America](#) , KIPP, New Leaders for New Schools, the Rainwater Leadership Alliance and the Council for Education Change have also agreed to work as collaborators.

The focus on recruiting principals from outside the ranks of traditional education comes as the federal government and some foundations seem increasingly willing to support new models that aspire to improve student performance.

Raising concerns

But such a bold move concerns some.

Rena Honea, president of the Alliance-AFT teachers association in Dallas, is against the concept and said it's demeaning to teachers who work through the ranks to become principals. She said not everyone can be a principal.

"That's like a meat butcher being able to be a surgeon because he can cut meat," Honea said. "Oh my God, talk about another sword going through the guts of teachers."

Honea said part of a principal's success is understanding how kids learn and think.

"Most people don't know what goes into the educational process," she said.

Efforts in FW

Meanwhile in Fort Worth, school officials have already begun to focus special effort on recruiting and training new principals. Two years ago, the school district created the Fort Worth Leadership Academy, designed to create "homegrown" principals who would be groomed for the district, said FWISD spokesman Clint Bond.

The first trainees were placed on campuses this school year, he said. The program was developed in conjunction with the University of Texas at [Arlington](#) .

Bush officials say top educators are open to ideas that will help them engage students and improve performance.

"The school districts that are partners with us want this," said James W. Guthrie, a senior fellow and director of education policy at the Bush Institute. He was formerly an educational leadership and policy professor at Vanderbilt University. "There's a huge demand."

Even so, the education infrastructure will have to change in order to place people from noneducation backgrounds at the helm of public schools.

"One of our components will be working with states so that there are alternative certification paths," Glassman said.

The new initiative also calls for a "global education performance report" to measure student achievement.

The number of training sites around the country is planned to grow to 25, and a new curriculum will be culled from the best efforts of the groups.

Said Glassman: "It is our ambition [that] at the end of 10 years, half the principals in the U.S. will be trained and evaluated and certified according to the program we develop."