

# ROLL CALL

## **Bob Wise's Lesson Plan**

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*By Jack Deutsch*

*Roll Call Staff*

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If Members of Congress see former Rep. Bob Wise (D-W.Va.) in their district, they shouldn't be alarmed: He isn't looking to resurrect his political career.

Instead, he's using his formidable political skills to generate grass-roots pressure to increase federal involvement in secondary schools.

It's a tough sell. Politicians tend to gravitate to elementary schools and colleges, sidestepping the more awkward years. And Wise acknowledged that after 18 years in Congress and four years as governor of West Virginia, he was no different. Photo ops are better at elementary schools where officials love reading sessions with the kiddies.

If politicians visit high schools at all, it's usually at an assembly or with gifted students.

"It's the students you don't meet" who need the most attention, Wise said. "You won't see the 30 percent who drop out."

As governor, Wise's signature education policy targeted college scholarships for better students. Then, after he left the governor's office in 2005, he became president of Alliance for Excellent Education, an advocacy group committed to improving high schools.

In his new role, Wise is testifying at hearings, traveling and now peddling his book, "Raising the Grade." The book is a policy primer on improving high schools, emphasizing what works and what changes are needed.

Federal policy in education focuses mostly on what Wise calls the bookends: early education with such programs as Head Start and colleges with various grants and scholarships. While federal funding accounts for about 8 percent of overall education spending, federal policies influence local spending. He said the theory was that after the federal government built a foundation, students would be on their way. That hasn't happened — one-third of students drop out, and unlike previous generations, their job prospects are grim.

Wise said 334 Congressional districts have at least one high school with a dropout rate of 40 percent, meaning that a widespread program aimed at keeping teenagers in school would touch most districts.

Wise said \$5 billion a year would cut the dropout rate in half. The money, he said, would go for literacy programs, tracking kids and innovation.

Wise was a quick-witted presence on the Hill for nearly two decades until 2001, when he left to take the governor's seat. (He and sharp-tongued Massachusetts Democratic Rep. Barney Frank teamed up to become the official "objectors" to GOP maneuvers after the Democrats lost the majority.) But Wise said he will have more influence by motivating the grass roots. From experience, he knows that public policy is hatched by a mix of interested lawmakers and the public, not policy wonks advocating change.

"Ten Ph.D.s are trumped by one legislator," he noted. And he said he urges advocates to invite Members to their high schools rather than visit the Capitol, recalling, "When I was in Congress, I never would have met with me."

It is the anecdote that often moves policy, and all lawmakers have high school experiences that could heighten interest in the issue. Wise said he moved from a crowded high school where he might have gotten lost. "Had I stayed at that larger school, I never would have been governor," he said.

As a result, Wise became one of the two most famous graduates of George Washington High School in Charleston, W.Va. It's either him or Jennifer Garner.