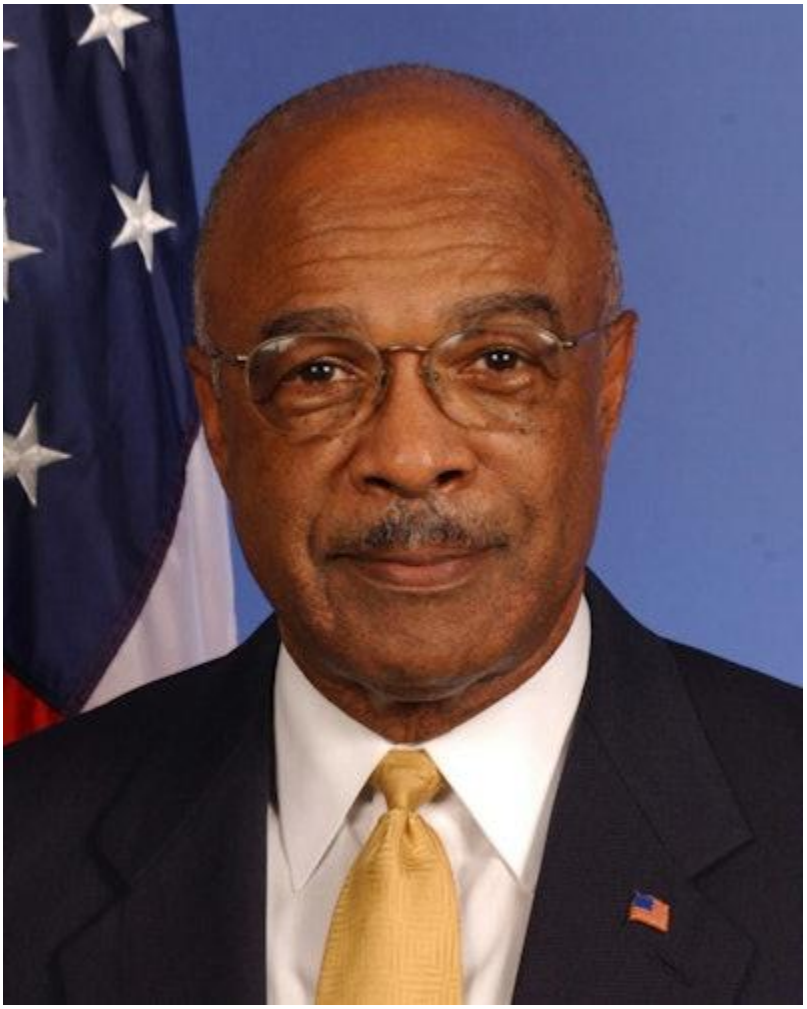
The EDU Ledger
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Education Stakeholders Reflect on the Legacy of Education Trailblazer Rod Paige

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Feb 4, 2026

When the late Dr. Rod Paige — who served as secretary of education under President George W. Bush — thought about how to improve America's schools, he thought on a broad, systemic level.



Dr. Rod PaigeHe worked in a bipartisan fashion to bring about meaningful reform and results. And he was a champion for students whose academic struggles might have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Those are just a few impressions of education leaders who either knew or worked closely with Paige at various stages in his remarkable career — one in which he rose from being the firstborn child of educators in Jim Crow Mississippi to ushering in a new era of educational reform and accountability on the national stage.

“When I look at Secretary Paige’s whole life, I see the story of someone who was just an extraordinary public servant,” said Dr. John B. King Jr., chancellor of the State University of New York, or SUNY, who served as U.S. secretary of education under former President Barack Obama.

King said education secretaries can use their position to amplify the voices of students and educators and focus the nation’s attention on shared, American values.

“And the underlying values Secretary Paige gave voice to are ones that are really important: the idea that race, place, and circumstance should not determine the education you deserve, or the expectations educators set for you about how high you can climb,” King said.

Origins

Widely hailed as the architect of No Child Left Behind — former President George W. Bush’s signature 2002 education reform initiative — Roderick Raynor Paige was born in 1933 in Monticello, Mississippi, into a household where education was paramount. His mother was a school librarian. His father was a school principal.

Paige graduated from Jackson State University (JSU) in 1955 and went on to earn a master’s and doctoral degree in physical education from Indiana State University. He served two years in the U.S. Navy, having been deployed to Okinawa, Japan.

Paige returned to his alma mater, JSU, and served as the university’s football coach from 1962 to 1969. During this period the team played in a 1967 game that “broke the color barrier” at Veterans Memorial Stadium in Jackson, Mississippi.

Paige went on to coach football for 13 years at Texas Southern University, where he began to make forays into the realm of education. He served as dean of the college of education at TSU from 1984 to 1990 and founded the university’s Center for Excellence in Urban Education.

Elected to serve on the school board for the Houston Independent School District in 1989, the move set the stage for Paige to become the district’s superintendent — a position that would ultimately catapult him into President Bush’s cabinet.

“I didn’t throw my hat in the ring,” Paige told Mississippi Public Broadcasting in 2017, regarding how he came into the superintendency. “Someone threw the hat at me.”

During his tenure as schools superintendent, Paige ushered in reforms that led to an academic turnaround that George W. Bush would hail during his 2000 presidential campaign as the “Texas miracle.” Among other things, Paige held principals and administrators accountable for student achievement. Test scores rose and dropout rates fell. In 2001 the American Association of School Administrators named Paige as “National Superintendent of the Year.”

When former President Bush tapped Paige to serve as education secretary in 2001, Paige became not only the first African American but the first school district superintendent to serve in the position.

Dr. Michael Casserly, a longtime former executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, says Paige “thought more deeply and more broadly about how big city school systems could improve than many of his colleagues.”

“In the mid-1980s through the late 1990s, much of the thinking around how to improve student achievement centered on what instructional programs districts bought and implemented in the classroom,” explained Casserly, who now serves as strategic advisor for the council.

“Many folks also thought during that period that allowing schools to do whatever they wanted instructionally would result in better achievement,” Casserly continued. “At the same time, there was emerging concern about the poor performance of various student groups by race, income, language, and disability. Some of that work came out of Texas.

“Rod thought deeply about these problems and about how school districts actually created them through the ‘soft bigotry of low expectations,’” Casserly said, quoting a phrase coined by a Bush speechwriter.

“He was good friends with the Bush family and was very much in sync with George Bush’s thinking about education,” Casserly continued. “Both believed to their core in higher student achievement, narrower achievement gaps, and being accountable for the results that one got in the classroom and in school districts.

“They were a perfect match and [No Child Left Behind] was the natural outcome.”

No Child Left Behind

Dr. Howard L. Fuller, founder of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University, and a pioneer in the school choice movement, said while he had some quibbles with No Child Left Behind, he and Paige bonded over their unconventional paths to becoming superintendents. Fuller served as superintendent for Milwaukee Public Schools from 1991 to 1995. Perhaps more importantly, they had a mutual interest in expanding educational options for students and families beyond traditional public schools.

“When [No Child Left Behind] was passed, what I told Rod was, my concern was that it didn’t allow for private school choice as a part of the options that would be available to parents” if their children were in failing public schools, Fuller said.

Fuller also thought it was quixotic for No Child Left Behind — with its emphasis on high-stakes testing and consequences for schools that failed to make “adequate yearly progress” — to call for 100% of students to be proficient in reading and math by 2014.

“I just thought that that was not feasible,” Fuller said.

On the other hand, Fuller said the landmark education law shined a much-needed light on the academic performance of specific groups of students, such as racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities and English language learners, to “see what was actually happening to them.”

“You couldn’t hide what was happening to them with aggregate data,” Fuller said.

Fuller also credited Paige with helping to institute a three-pronged approach at the local level in Washington, D.C. that involved improving D.C.’s traditional public schools, creating new charter schools and providing “opportunity” scholarships to attend private schools.

“When Rod was the secretary of education, he convened a meeting involving the mayor of D.C. [Anthony Williams], and Kevin Chavous, who, at that time, was the chair of the education committee for the D.C. city council, and myself, to talk about how to create what became known as the three-sector initiative,” Fuller recalled. “So, Rod and I, along with Kevin and the mayor, Mayor Williams at that time, worked together to make this happen.”

He said the meeting was notable because it involved “four Black men getting in a room and getting ready to do something that nobody thought was possible, or had not been done before.”

“When Rod did that, a lot of the kinds of [school] choice that you have all around the country today, those things didn’t exist back at that point in time,” Fuller recalled. “And his being willing to be a critical part of making that happen was groundbreaking.”

Fuller said Paige also saw to it that Black Alliance for Educational Options — a school choice organization that Fuller founded — got a federal grant to provide after-school programs focused on tutoring as part of the No Child Left Behind effort. The idea, Fuller said, was to "make sure that there were some Black organizations and Black parents that were engaged in that effort."

Fuller said it's interesting to compare the Trump administration's efforts to dismantle the Department of Education to how Paige saw the department.

"He saw using the department to try to make a difference as opposed to eliminating the department," Fuller said.

Fuller hailed Paige for his willingness to work across the aisle. King, the former education secretary, was a school principal in Massachusetts when Paige became education secretary and made similar remarks.

"All policies are imperfect, but I appreciated that my then-Senator, Ted Kennedy, worked with the Bush Administration to draw attention to accountability in K-12 education, and I appreciated that Secretary Paige used his platform to try to uplift students, especially those from historically underserved communities," King said. "No matter the flaws in any particular policy, this is a man who made his entire life about the education of our students, and that ought to be honored and celebrated."

King told *The EDU Ledger* that it "meant a lot" to him that Paige had been a "trailblazer" as the first Black secretary of education.

"Those who are first to any big title must overcome so many more hurdles than those following in their footsteps," said King, who was the first Afro-Latine secretary of education, "and so I owed him a great deal of gratitude."