

Searching for Good Ideas

A conservative leader seeks out people of all views to devise innovations to solve America's problems

By Ian Wilhelm
NEWT GINGRICH has not held elected office for a decade, but the former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives continues to play a major role in conservative politics—and he is starting to raise his voice on non-profit issues as well.

The former Republican lawmaker from Georgia has considered running again for government office, including making a bid for the White House, but for now he says he is focused on being chairman of his advocacy group, American Solutions for Winning the Future, which he started in 2007.

Well known as a conservative firebrand, Mr. Gingrich says American Solutions embraces a "tripartisan" approach—Republican, Democrat, and independent—to fix some of America's biggest problems, such as failing public schools, rising energy needs, and illegal immigration.

In his work with American Solutions, he has forged some unusual alliances.

He has appeared in a television commercial for the We Campaign, a media project started by former vice president Al Gore to promote ways to curb climate change. And to improve the education of inner-city youngsters, he has teamed up with the civil-rights activist Al Sharpton.

Through national meetings, surveys, and the Internet, American Solutions seeks to solicit ideas from the public and bring those ideas to the nation's capital—a place Mr. Gingrich says is devoid of new thinking regardless of the political party in power.

In an interview with *The Chronicle*, the former speaker said that philanthropy, and attempts by political leaders to support it, also lack fresh ideas.

For example, he derided John McCain and Barack Obama's proposals to expand national service as feeding government bureaucracy. On education, one of his most passionate causes, he says that large foundations continue to back flawed approaches to fixing public schools.

"We need serious experiments—and we need them most of all in places like Detroit or on Native American reservations—of having foundations go in that are prepared to break out" of the old model, he says. "No matter how much you invest in the stagecoach line, you're not going to invent the airplane."

Looking to the Future

Mr. Gingrich says he founded American Solutions because he saw a bleak future for his grandchildren, who are ages 7 and 9.

"I want to know what it will take for us to be the most successful, prosperous, and safest country in the world when my two grandchildren are in their 40s," he says, sitting in his office in Washington,



Newt Gingrich, the former Speaker of the House, says experimenting with projects outside Washington is crucial: "If you are trying to make really large-scale change, you have to start in the country and come back to the capital."

a few blocks from the White House.

The advocacy group's main goal has been to articulate a common set of beliefs shared by Americans of all political stripes.

Last year it polled 1,000 people nationwide on topics such as taxes, energy and the environment, religion, and national security to find a consensus on crucial issues.

From the findings the organization wrote a so-called Platform for the American People, 10 statements it said were supported by a majority of respondents. They include calls for making English the official language of the U.S. government, pushing elected leaders to increase energy supplies, keeping the phrase "one nation under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, and increasing support for math and science education.

In addition, American Solutions has held events nationwide, including during both the Republican and the Democratic national conventions. And its Web site, <http://www.AmericanSolutions.com>, includes a "Solutions Lab," an online chat room where visitors can suggest and discuss ways to solve national problems.

Mr. Gingrich says he wants American Solutions to influence the 500,000 or so state, county, and local elected officials, from members of the school board to state legislators.

"I actually believe if you are trying to make really large-scale change, you have to start in the country and come back to the capital. You can't gain momentum at the center because the level of power at the center is too great," he says.

Fixing the Schools

One of his top priorities is bolstering American public education.

"We need serious experiments of having foundations go in that are prepared to break out" of the old approach to grant making.

time in Congress called for the dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education, says nonprofit groups need to take radical approaches to education in the country, and as an example, he points to a charity created last year by his daughters, Jackie Cushman and Kathy Lubbers.

Their organization, the Learning Makes a Difference Foundation, has taken one of Mr. Gingrich's ideas—to pay poor-performing students to improve their study skills—and put it in practice in two schools in Fulton County, Ga., where the charity is based.

"He has lots of ideas, lots and lots, but this one was particularly interesting to me," says Ms. Cushman, who serves as the group's president.

To be sure, similar programs have sprung up independently of Mr. Gingrich in Baltimore, New York, and elsewhere.

Unlike other programs, though, Learning Makes a Difference has focused on math and science and attempted to demonstrate relatively quickly whether the payments help, says Ms. Cushman.

This year the group paid 40 students in eighth and 11th grade \$8 an hour to attend tutoring sessions, with a cash bonus for passing standardized tests or achieving a B or higher in math and science.

According to a study by an independent research organization, at the end of 14 weeks half the students did better than peers who weren't enrolled in the program.

"The results of the study showed that the kids clearly outperformed the control group and they clearly came away with a stronger ability to learn and achieve in school," says Ms. Cushman.

She also says that while half the students spent the money they earned on personal items, like clothes, others gave it to their parents and some established college funds. The group is now raising \$175,000 to increase the program to 56 students.

Ms. Cushman says she understands the criticism that the payments seem like bribes, but says that the program is changing attitudes toward learning. For example, in the new phase, previous participants will serve as unpaid advisers to the new students enrolled in the program. "They'll reach behind them and help others along," she says.

Some education experts disagree with student cash incentives.

William J. Slotnik, executive director of the Community Training and Assistance Center, a nonprofit group in Boston that provides managerial training and other technical aid to schools and education organizations nationwide,

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A Former Congressman Leads an Effort to Get New Ideas From Outside Washington



Jackie Cushman, Newt Gingrich's daughter, co-founded a charity that pays students to improve their study skills. Early tests show that the program has worked, she says.

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says the Learning Makes a Difference project steers precious resources to benefit a limited number of students and that cash rewards could become a reverse incentive, meaning some students may underperform to join the program and receive money.

"Rather than paying kids, can't we make classroom learning more exciting for all students?" he asks.

For his part, Mr. Gingrich maintains that too many donors and charities are not challenging themselves to think differently about education. They "consistently go back to the failed bureaucracies, the failed unions, and the failed schools of education," he says.

Some of his ideas appear to be taking hold.

The president of the Council on Foundations, Steve Gunderson, a former Republican lawmaker who first met Mr. Gingrich while they both served in the House of Representatives, has invited Mr. Gingrich to speak at council meetings. Before his first speech, during the association's 2006 event, Mr. Gunderson says audience members were wary of the former speaker but warmed to him.

"There are people who almost didn't go to his session and ended up afterward standing in line to have him autograph his book," says Mr. Gunderson.

But Rick Cohen, former executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, is skeptical of Mr. Gingrich's role as an authority on nonprofit issues given his connection to a scandal in the 1990s.

While he was in Congress, Mr. Gingrich was accused of using nonprofit groups to engage in illegal partisan activities, a charge he denies.

After a multiyear investigation, the Internal Revenue Service cleared the organizations in question, the Abraham Lincoln Opportunity Foundation and the

were explicitly political in a way that we didn't have to worry about the IRS," says the former speaker.

The designation, however, has forced Mr. Gingrich to turn down some financial support.

Last year, the Hasan Family Foundation, in Pueblo, Colo., gave American Solutions \$50,000, which the advocacy group had to return because charitable foundations are not allowed to give to political organizations.

"That was just a mistake," says Mr. Gingrich.

Building Bridges

While some may be wary of American Solutions, Mr. Gingrich says he will continue to try and build political bridges.

"I am a reform Republican looking for reform Democrats and reform independents who collectively understand the old order isn't going to make it," says Mr. Gingrich. "We're not going to be the most successful country in the world if we don't break out."

And as part of that, whether as chairman of American Solutions or potentially as an elected official, Mr. Gingrich will probably continue to dare nonprofit leaders to try new approaches.

"I would say to these guys, who are very sincere, if you've got 20 to 25 years of failure of changing a neighborhood, I'd love to talk with you about the core values you're applying. I think you're probably failing because you're kidding yourselves about values that work," he says.

"It's probably a lot harder and a lot more wrenching change than you're comfortable with."

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Progress and Freedom Foundation, but Mr. Gingrich was fined \$300,000 by Congress for ethics violations.

In part because of the scrutiny he received as a congressman, Mr. Gingrich established American Solutions as a tax-exempt political group known as a 527, a reference to its designation under the U.S. tax code.

In this category, the group can endorse political candidates and accept unlimited contribution amounts, though the donations are not tax-deductible. (The group has not officially expressed support for either presidential candidate.)

"We wanted to say things that