

# The Product of Commitment and Character

Dave Spence's 50-year career leaves  
a lasting impact on education





*Spence when he arrived at SREB as president*

**T**he most effective leaders understand complexity and how to navigate it. They see the many working parts of a system and can spot malfunctions and gaps. They know how to unlock siloes and remove walls. They make connections — between disparate ideas and among dissenting people. And they do all of this to get things done.

Dave Spence is such a leader. Over a career in education that crosses a full half-century, he has proved to be the consummate boundary spanner and bridge builder for the betterment of American education. As he retires this summer as president of the Southern Regional Education Board, he leaves an organization he helped shape into a trusted guide for 16 states seeking to make education better for their residents.

“I don’t know where our states would be in education without SREB’s involvement,” says Francis Thompson, a Louisiana state senator and longtime SREB board member. “And I don’t know where SREB would be without Dave Spence.”

Spence’s mark on SREB and education has breadth and depth, and for evidence of both, you need only to look at SREB’s portfolio of significant commission work.

Almost half of Spence’s career was spent with SREB, a tenure marked by three tours of duty. He started as a research associate in the mid ’70s, when the organization’s inclusion of K-12 education was still a few years away. He returned in the mid-’80s, spending three years as vice president in charge of educational policies. Nearly two decades later, in 2005, he was named president.

Spence’s mark on SREB and education has breadth and depth, and for evidence of both, you need only to look at SREB’s portfolio of significant commission work. He established the process for the commissions a year after returning to SREB as president, and since then, 10 commissions — each comprised of as many as 40 legislators and education leaders — have tackled some of the hardest questions in education. Such as: how can teachers become better prepared to teach? And how can college be made more affordable?

“The idea was to get them together and have them spend considerable time on study and recommendations,” Spence explains. “But the key was that the people developing and recommending the policies were in a good position to go back to their state and implement the recommendations. It’s an idea that’s worked.”

## Taking the Lead on Critical Issues:

### *SREB’s 10 Commissions*

Career and Technical Education

College Affordability

College Completion

Community Colleges

Computer Science and Information Technology

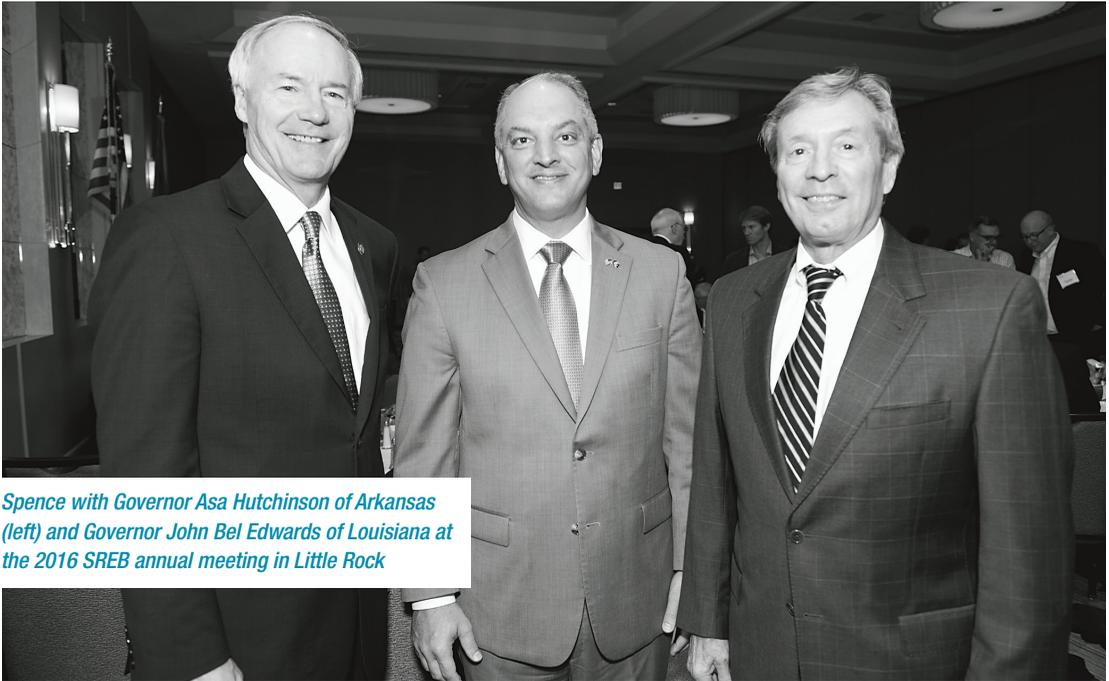
Early Childhood Education

Middle Grades Education

Reading and Writing in Middle and High School

School Accountability

Teacher Preparation



*Spence with Governor Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas (left) and Governor John Bel Edwards of Louisiana at the 2016 SREB annual meeting in Little Rock*

Glen Johnson, chancellor of the Oklahoma State System of Higher Education and former vice chair of SREB, describes the commissions as a signature Spence leaves at SREB. “Each one was a comprehensive complement of legislators and subject matter experts in education,” Johnson says. “And for each, Dave put the best team together to get out ahead of some of the most critical issues in the spectrum of education.”

The commissions have their roots in another era, namely the period in the mid-1980s when Spence was in his second stint at SREB. Back then, SREB’s Commission for Educational Quality — chaired by a series of governors like William Winter of Mississippi, Richard Riley of South Carolina and Lamar Alexander of Tennessee — wrestled with a number of issues essential to improving education. Spence was intimately involved in the

commission’s work, and one of those issues would become a prominent focal point in his career: preparing students for their education beyond high school. It took shape under the identity of “college readiness,” but over time it expanded to include readiness for careers as well.

“I still see figures out there that say 30 percent of high school students are not prepared for college-level work, but the data show it’s more like 60 or 70 percent,” Spence says. “That means that, of the students leaving high school with a college prep diploma, a substantial majority still lack some combination of the math, reading and writing skills needed to succeed in college.”

It was during his term as executive vice chancellor and chief academic officer of the California State University that Spence made readiness a

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centerpiece of his work. Getting policymakers and lawmakers to even acknowledge the problem was the first challenge, he recalls; students were taking the right courses for college prep, so it was often assumed that good grades in those courses made them college-ready. Whatever they lacked could be shored up in remediation classes in college. “The thinking was, let the colleges handle it,” Spence observes. “But that adds time and cost for both the student and state.”

The solution Spence crafted in California was a novel idea: Find out which high school juniors were not ready for college and have them take remedial courses in their senior year of high school, rather than at college. It was called the Early Assessment Program, and while the concept seems simple, it required an unprecedented amount of cooperation between Cal State and the K-12 system.

“It was a little tense at first, because we didn’t want it to seem like we were blaming K-12 somehow,” Spence recalls. “One factor in the lack of readiness was that higher education wasn’t being entirely clear about what was expected of high school graduates.”

With the Early Assessment Program, California became the first state in the country to formally assess 11th graders’ college readiness in reading, writing and math and then offer supplemental instruction to students who needed it. The assessments were voluntary — students could choose whether to check their own readiness and take the senior-year courses — but they did so in astonishing numbers.

“Nobody had tried anything like that before on that scale,” says Patrick Callan, then president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (NCPPE). “It took enormous

knowledge of the school world and the higher education world as well as great political skill to bring about such an innovative approach.”

“I counted seven times where I thought our efforts were dead,” Spence recalls. “Pat Callan wanted me to come to talk to his group about the program, but I kept saying, ‘Not yet, Pat, I’m not sure it’s going to happen.’ I spent my last four years in California setting up all sorts of joint committees with K-12 and getting buy-in. It was a lot of trips to Sacramento.”

When he moved to Georgia in 2005 to head up SREB, Spence aimed to build on that experience by making readiness a policy priority in the southern region. A landmark 2010 report from SREB and NCPPE, “Beyond the Rhetoric: Improving College Readiness through Coherent State Policy,” became the foundation for the issue in the region. It proposed a six-point model to help states better prepare students for college. Today, those six actions remain an effective blueprint: setting clear standards, assessing readiness, providing seniors with readiness courses, developing teachers, placing students in appropriate college courses and promoting accountability.

Since then, eight SREB states have passed legislation to strengthen readiness. School districts in 12 states inside and outside the region offer senior-year readiness courses. And SREB estimates that it has trained over 2,500 teachers to offer the courses in more than 1,000 schools, involving upwards of 50,000 students. “We still have work to do,” Spence says, “but we’ve clearly elevated the issue and the need for statewide policy, and we’ve seen some very good results.”

While the policy commissions and college and career readiness stand out as hallmarks of his career,

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Spence has helped states make great progress in a number of other areas. While executive vice chancellor and chief academic officer in Florida, he was instrumental in establishing a system to hold universities accountable for advancing toward goals. He was also the architect of an initiative to streamline student transfers among universities — no small feat for a state that led the nation in the number of student transfers. In California, Spence made completing college a higher priority, launching a multi-faceted initiative to elevate graduation rates. He also engineered an accountability system to gauge university progress in improving college completion.

The best appraisal of a life’s work examines method as much as metrics; it’s not only the milestones that matter, but how you got there. By that standard, the philosophies and traits that characterize Spence factor into his contributions. Three stand out.

The first is expertise. Beginning with his initial post-doc jobs on the campus of his *alma mater*, State University of New York at Buffalo, Spence has been a diligent student of education policy and practice. Even as president of SREB, he has continued to plumb the depths of a topic or issue. “I’ve watched him present so many times,” Senator Thompson says. “When he speaks, you can be confident that he’s prepared. He’s never searching for something — he’s got it all planned out in his mind.”

“He’s steeped in policy, yes, but he knows how to relate, and that’s equally important,” Chancellor Johnson says. “He can go into a committee in Maryland and talk about the issue of the day, and then the very next day, talk in depth about another issue in Tennessee. To have such expertise in the issues and to be able to relate them to lawmakers is a unique skill set.”



Spence with Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear (third from left) and longtime Arkansas legislators and board members Johnnie Roebuck and Joyce Elliott, at a meeting of the SREB Early Childhood Commission in 2013 in Louisville, Kentucky

While Spence enjoys the deep dive, he's not a soloist, and that's another factor in his success. He's made a point to surround himself with talented people and give them room to work.

"He's able to balance leadership and management, and that's something a lot of leaders have trouble with," says Johnnie Roebuck, a retired educator and former majority leader in the Arkansas House of Representatives. "He knows how to bring in the right people, the best people, and he knows how to get out of the way." (Spence is inclined to deflect such credit, saying simply: "At SREB, I have the best staff I've had anywhere.")

Finally, there is the person himself. It's widely acknowledged that, with Spence, "what you see is what you get," and that his authenticity helps him connect equally well with academics, politicians and policymakers. "It's not that Dave has to be friendly with everyone because he's the president," says Chancellor Johnson. "He's warm, and that warmth is genuine. It's one reason he's so highly regarded by other organizations."

It helps that he's willing to go the extra mile when the situation calls for it. When he moved from Florida to California in 1999 to serve Cal State in the dual role of executive vice chancellor and chief academic officer, Spence understood the importance of relating to college faculty. He accepted a teaching position and faithfully participated in meetings of Cal State's Academic Senate and its committees — "probably more... than all his predecessors combined," according to a resolution honoring him in 2005.

Indeed, the commitment and character Spence has demonstrated throughout his career helped SREB uphold what may be its greatest asset — the consistent practice of putting education ahead of politics. The organization's nonpartisanship figures prominently in its effectiveness. Spence has taken great care to honor and protect it in his tenure.



"Having a whole bunch of diverse states is very difficult — it's a really tough job," Callan observes. "But the leader of the organization sets the tone, and Dave makes the conversation about problem solving. He's always been issue-driven."

At the core of every issue, ultimately, are students. If there's a single thread interwoven through Dave Spence's career, it's his singular motivation for working hard — namely, to give every American the opportunity and support to take his or her education as far as possible in life.

"It's not any more complicated than that," Spence says. "To help students achieve, we've got to continue improving, in our states and across the country. We owe them that."



To Dave: Thank you for all you've done for SREB  
and for the education of students across the South.

# SREB

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