The man behind
The Taylor Plan
Patrick F. Taylor hopes to turn America's educational system around

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People need heroes, but where are the Davy Crocketts and Douglas MacArthurs of the 1990s? Coomskin caps and military swagger sticks are out, and men like Martin Luther King Jr. come only once in a lifetime. Today's hero is a man like Patrick F. Taylor, Louisiana oilman who offers students hope and opportunity. To them, he is a hero, and they're singing his praises.

In a recent appearance at Capitol Senior High, Taylor sat calmly on stage, tears coming to his eyes as the student choir sang "You Are My Hero..." from Andrew Lloyd Webber's Wind Beneath My Wings.

It was a special moment for Taylor and for the students, most of them black, most from low-income families. Here was The Man; the man who made it from a poor East Texas background to a New Orleans penthouse, the man who understands poverty and tells kids: "If I can do it, you can do it."

Taylor masterminded Louisiana's Taylor Plan bill, signed into law July 10 as Louisiana Act 789 and offering an educational future for youngsters from low-income families. The plan, along with a segment with Mike Wallace on 60 Minutes about Taylor's Kids in New Orleans, has launched a nationwide project for this successful, and somewhat colorful, man who has become Louisiana's ambassador for education — and positive thinking. For more than a year, he's been crisscrossing the United States, urging legislators and businessmen to get laws passed that he hopes will turn America's educational system around.

Sole owner and chief executive officer of Taylor Energy, an independent oil and gas exploration and drilling company, the 55-year-old Taylor is married to the former Phyllis Miller, an attorney and native of Abbeville. Currently she devotes much of her time to civic and cultural interests in New Orleans, as well as her husband's educational projects, which have led to the establishment of the Patrick F. Taylor Foundation. Other endeavors include Taylor Scholarships at the University of New Orleans and Project New Orleans, a program by which local businessmen have raised approximately $3 million to support college students who are from federally subsidized housing projects.

Taylor is a Republican, sportsman, recipient of numerous honorary degrees and many awards, including the 1986 Horatio Alger Award and the Freedoms Foundation National Service Medal. He was born in Beaumont, Texas, and although he has resided in Louisiana since college days at LSU, he still talks with an East Texas accent. Politically a conservative, he dresses with typical oilman flair.

Taylor's education drive began in March 1986, when he was asked to speak to 221 twice-failed, at-risk seventh- and eighth-graders at Livingston Middle School in East New Orleans. Most of the students were from single-parent homes in a high crime, high drug area. Most were black. Before he left that day, he promised to personally see to it that each of them would get a college education if they met certain standards. Thus far, 172 of "Taylor's Kids" are still in school (most of the attritions being from family moves, not dropouts). In one year, 21 made the honor roll.

At Capitol High, Taylor explained what happened that day in New Orleans.

"I was told I couldn't give my standard Horatio Alger speech to the students at Livingston Middle School who had already failed twice," he said. "I started to think about it.

"I was on the street at 16, but I stayed in school because I had a dream. When I got an A, I got a hug from Mama. When I got a C or D, I get whapped by my stepdaddy," said Taylor.

He explained that he realized while still in high school the only way he was going to get his dream was to attend college. LSU was the only university where he could get a degree in petroleum engineering, because at that time the university offered free admission and waived out-of-state tuition for him. "I've been eternally grateful," said Taylor, "and I've stayed in Louisiana.

"In March of '88 I learned that, in fact, things have changed. Students were dropping out of school in the eighth grade because high school didn't mean anything." Poor students had no opportunity to go on with their education.

"America's children know deeply that education is vital in their lives. Why did they feel excluded? Eighty percent of the families in this state could not afford college. Denial of income and lack of opportunity are the two major factors in keeping the kids out of college," Taylor said.

He explained that he put together a team which studied the problem and came up with two major needs.

"We had to prevail upon universities to adopt admissions and set standards so students would know what classes (high school) they needed to take and the grades they needed to make in order to

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Taylor left, checks his notes before addressing students at Capitol High. Also seated are William Turner Jr., EBR School Superintendent Bernard Weiss, Secretary of Employment and Training Phyllis Mouton, and EBR School Superintendent Bernard Weiss.

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— Taylor

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attend and graduate from college. And we called upon the state of Louisiana to pay tuition and upkeep for every low- and middle-income kid who met the standards.

“Now, Louisiana is the first state in the nation leading this program. Twenty-one other states are following, including North Carolina, Alabama, Maryland, and Delaware.”

Looking squarely at his Capitol High School audience, Taylor said, “I like to talk to people who have a dream, who want to be somebody.”

He stressed that America has gone past establishing civil rights, that being Irish-American, Mexican-American or African-American does not make a difference. “Wanting to learn does,” he said. “One thing I’ve learned is that all of our kids can learn. There are three things you need to succeed,” said Taylor. “The first is hard work, the second is integrity, and the third is guts.”

“Be what you want to be,” he said. “You can start doing it now. Quit cutting corners. If you find yourself being impolite to teachers and fellow students, stop it.”

As for honesty, he said: “It’s good for you. If you’ll try it, you’ll like it.” Concerning guts: “Have the courage to stand up and be true to yourself.”

“I haven’t told you anything you don’t already know,” said Taylor. “If you stay in school every day, put out your best effort, you’ll succeed.

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Success or failure is a very personal thing. If you drop out, if you fail, you can blame whoever you want, but you pay the penalty.

“Now, in Louisiana we’ve begun to change things. As I continue traveling around the nation, I need you. I need to tell the legislators in other states that using drugs at Capitol High School in Baton Rouge is the furthest thing from students’ minds. That doing crime or getting pregnant is the furthest thing from their minds,” said Taylor.

“You show us, you show me, and I’ll carry the message, but I can’t do it without you.”

When Taylor finished talking, students were subdued, polite. Next, they were shown the 60 Minutes film about Taylor’s Kids. Suddenly, it all came together: the speech, the film — the dream. They stood and cheered, then headed out for lunch period walking a little taller.

Several Capitol High students appeared impressed with Taylor’s speech.

Carla Hamlin, a senior, said, “I plan on going to college, but I really don’t know what I want to study. I like the part in the speech where Mr. Taylor said he really wanted us to succeed in life.”

“I liked what he said,” said Ken McCray, a 10th-grader. “I made me pay attention to the kinds of clothes a lot of kids have — but I mean they were sharp, they simply sparkled. Every one of the young men had gone and gotten a haircut, and they were sitting there just grinning at me, as if each and every one was saying ‘just look at me.’”

Taylor explained how he came to look at the problems these students face.

“There was a report issued by a U.S. Senate committee on families, and it had to do with the stagnation of income at the family level. It was a formal report by the (Continued on Page 5)
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U.S. Congress, and that report conclud-
ed that there were no solutions — no so-
lutions. There was nothing we could do.
We had tried everything. Remember
Carter’s inner-city economic stuff. The
Democratic leadership of that subcom-
nittee blamed everything on Ronald
Reagan. But it was a Republican . . .
gave the Republican viewpoint, say-
ing there were no solutions because we
could not change the behavior patterns
of those children.

"That absolutely infuriated me," said
Taylor. "Because what we have seen —
and this was instantaneous with Taylor’s
Kids — is an instantaneous change in
behavior. It’s neither surprising nor illogi-
cal. Going by what I said at first, kids are
kids. They will respond if we give them
what they truly want, which is a chance
to succeed.

"To participate, that’s what they want. They want the same opportu-
nity to work and grow toward a future as the
affluent kids in this country."

Taylor added, "I once made the state-
ment that I don’t want, in essence, to put
the criminal justice system out of busi-
ness by reducing the need for it. How
about putting the locksmiths out of busi-
ness?"

"If you look at the social ills in our
country, let’s look at dropouts, and ev-
erthing that comes from it — the use
of drugs, commission of crime, the
conscious choice of teen pregnancy. Under-
stand, teen pregnancy is not by accident,
not by lack of knowledge or information.
It is by choice. If you look at that, and
you look at income levels in the country
— forget race. If you start at the very top,
among the most affluent, you do see rare
occurrences of drug abuse and crime.
Sure, you do have affluent kids
slaughtering their parents in the middle
of the night, but we consider that to be an
anachronism. It’s unexpected, and it’s a
very small percentage of involvement.
As we come down the income level, then
that percentage of involvement — drop-
outs, drugs, crime, teen pregnancy — in-
creases. The further you go down this
socio-economic strata — the elite like
that term — that curve increases that
dramatically. Why?

"We seem to be justifying our actions
by assuming the poorer people are, the
dumber they are. The reason that the
large incidence of social ills is in the
lower economic strata is because they
lack the ability to learn, they lack the
will to work, they lack the ambition to suc-
cceed. There are less family values. The
parents don’t care about their children."

"That’s ridiculous," Taylor empha-
sized. "It is not a moral lack. It’s almost
as if it’s the dark side, if you will, of our
age-old Puritan ethic in this country. It’s
as if we’re saying: ‘If you’re wealthier,
you’re better. If you’re poor, you’re of
less value.’ ‘You’re of less innate worth.’

"OK. What is the basic premise of the
conservative ideal? It’s the worth of the
individual. The opposite of liberalism.
Liberalism, in the modern definition, is
the care of the individual, centralized
planning, dictated welfare, subsistence.
But all of that tends to keep people
where they are. The effect of it is to hold
people down. Not to bring them up.
The conservative ideal is to recognize the
worth of each and every individual given
equal opportunity."

How does he feel about being called
an ambassador at large for Louisi-
a?

He laughed. "I’ll have you know that
I’m described as the National Educa-
tional Front, which is actually ridicu-

Omitted text: Taylor has become an ardent cam-
paigner for educational philosophies.
He has organized a competent staff to
run his office in New Orleans and to plan
his travels. He averages about three
days a week traveling and talking to groups
on education. More recently, he’s been
writing with legislators in North Caroli-
na and Arkansas.

Taylor is a risk-taker; his success has
been due to risks and self-reliance. Many
of the opportunities that have come his
way, he created himself.

"Businessmen are not accustomed to taking the
Taylor graduated from LSU in 1959 and went to work for John Mecom Sr., one of the legendary figures in the Texas oil industry.

"I talked myself into a job with the Mecom organization because I had graduated from Kinkaid in Houston, one of the finest prep schools in the country. But I had graduated on a scholastic scholarship so I was literally the poor kid on the block."

What was it like being a poor kid in a rich kids' school?

"Wonderful," said Taylor. "I remember when I met with the headmaster, Mr. John Cooper, and the principal of the upper school, Carl Reed."

"I remember when I was notified that I could go to Kinkaid because I knew that it was an opportunity to go on to college, because to me high school was a pathway. I felt it was a guarantee — and that is the basic premise of the Taylor Plan — high school is no longer a dead end. It is but a pathway to something greater. And that can be a vo-tech school — a preparation for success."

"They told me that my scholarship was to be a secret that no one was to know. I looked at these two very learned gentlemen and I said: 'I'm sorry, that is ridiculous. Everybody on campus is going to know that I have to have some help to go here. There is no way that my family could afford this. They're going to look at me and know. I can't dress like these kids do.'"

"They were concerned that I would feel different," said Taylor, "that I would feel of lesser worth than the children of the affluent. They missed one pertinent point that is vital to my argument around this country. If I was there — just like right now the Taylor Plan kids on campuses of this state — I was there because I had earned it. I wasn't ashamed of having less material wealth. I wasn't ashamed of not being able to dress, I wasn't ashamed of not being able to drive to school in my own car like all the other kids. I was proud of it. I was there because I was good. The amazing thing about it was that I can think of a single instance where any other student treated me with anything but full respect."

Talking about his mother, Taylor said, "She was divorced when I was just a baby, and later married Mr. Gayman. Her name is Sybil. She's still living, and she's 80-something years old. She resides in Crowley, La. They moved there years after I had left home. She's obviously proud, primarily of what I'm doing for the kids. My mother is pampered," smiled Taylor. "She is a wonderful, wonderful person. She is the latchpin of my early years."

"All I ever wanted to be was an oilman, and one job available in 1959 was with a drilling contractor. I wanted that to learn the oil business — drilling and production. So I sought out an opportunity with Mr. Mecom with his organization here in New Orleans. Interestingly enough, I went to work for him in February of 1959, and in 1960 we moved into the Howard Library, which of course I own now and am now restoring."

"I tell kids, if you want to be somebody, then start acting like somebody. If you want to be a success in school, then start acting like a success in school."

From Taylor's activities, barnstorming the United States in pursuit of selling the Taylor Plan, one would think the oilman is running for political office. "The Republican Party needs attractive candidates," he agreed, "and I've been pushed to run for office, but I'm avoiding going into politics."

He added, "I seem to be more effective as I am." He believes that if he were to become a candidate for office at this time people would question his motives and believe he was promoting the Taylor Plan only for personal aggrandizement.

"I don't deny I consider myself an effective messenger," he said. "Being a salesman is part of being a success in any field."

The conversation once again turned to the students who set him on this path. "When Mike Wallace was here (in New Orleans), he was tough on me. We don't have any children, and he asked some of the Taylor's Kids how they felt about a man who didn't have any kids trying to help them."

They answered: 'We are his kids.'"