

# A Path and a Purpose

Gene Bottoms' Career in What Works in Schools



Bottoms speaks at the Commission on Career and Technical Education meeting at the Governor's Mansion, Frankfort Kentucky 2014.



**A**fter a remarkable 60-year career in education, Gene Bottoms, senior vice president of SREB, retired in late April. His contributions to education in the southern region and beyond are difficult to overestimate. In 31 years with SREB, Bottoms helped revamp career education in America and set in place school improvement practices that have improved the prospects of hundreds of thousands of students.

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Mary Johnson, one of his early hires at SREB, refers to Bottoms as “the most forward-thinking person I have ever known.” But his accomplishments owe as much to getting into the trenches as to vision, if that means just imagining what might be. “He’s always been way outside the curve in identifying and describing what’s needed for teachers and students to succeed,” Johnson says, but to shape those ideas into school success he brings other strengths to bear: “obtaining the money, providing the qualified assistance, and making sure the goal is met and continues. No one has ever worked harder or longer to accomplish these far-reaching objectives.”

The way forward for Dr. Bottoms has always been through real educational experience: first you learn what will lift an educational enterprise by talking to people and gathering data on best practices; then you convince leaders to keep what works and find a better plan for what doesn’t.

Bottoms’ career before arriving at SREB in 1987 began at age 20 with a stint teaching eighth grade in Forsyth County, Georgia, and progressed to positions as teacher, coach and principal in Barrow County. A master’s and doctorate in counseling came next as he combined working in education with studying it, a practice he would follow for the rest of his career.

Mixing theory with practice has been a hallmark of Bottoms’ time at SREB. Before he was SREB’s senior vice president, indeed before he was Dr. Bottoms, his ability to visualize improvements in students’ lives

had already made itself clear, along with a gift for seeing those visions through to reality. As a principal he raised math and literacy achievement for his school — for his *students*, he would be the first to stress — and adapted an achievement test to measure it. He started a library and a Weekly Reader program and persuaded a bookmobile to visit regularly.

A few years later Bottoms developed a student service system and admissions process for Southern Georgia Technical College in Americus, then set out to visit schools south of Macon to convince them to send students to SGTC. This was a characteristically hands-on (or more accurately wheels-on) approach, for Bottoms is described by all who know him as a tireless advocate, proponent, facilitator and lobbyist for any idea he believes in.

Bottoms’ very first SREB hire describes his motivating philosophy this way: “We need to *test*, not just talk; to associate people’s actual instructional experience in high school with how they *did* in high school, to link experience and achievement in a qualitative as well as quantitative way,” remembers Alice Higgins. From the beginning, she says, that was the point of the teacher surveys and site reports, the interviews with students and principals, superintendents and counselors — to “see how the machine was put together.”

Bottoms has always placed a premium on being out in the world of education, his programs and ideas buttressed by research but informed by people. These include the policymakers and movers and shakers at district and state levels, but

especially those charged with doing the actual moving and shaking: teachers and principals, superintendents and students.

At the Georgia Department of Education, Bottoms helped increase enrollment at career-technical schools, created a course to help ninth graders explore potential careers via hands-on field trips, and instituted programs to connect academic and vocational learning.

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connected academic and vocational school improvement by putting Bottoms in charge of both, and four years later he was elected president of the American Vocational Association (now the Association for Career & Technical Education).

Bottoms' years in Washington brought a signal achievement. While serving at AVA he became concerned that a new federal administration's budget priorities might reverse recent progress in career and technical education. In 1981, he says, “The phones rang all day long at AVA headquarters the day after President Reagan presented a budget that would rescind \$200 million in funding for vocational education.”

That potential cut, coupled with the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, galvanized an effort to protect and extend funding for what was then called vocational education. In 1984, President Reagan signed the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act. The Perkins Act has been reauthorized several times since, most recently in 2006 by an almost unanimous vote in Congress.

Named for its sponsor, a longtime representative from Kentucky and chair of the House Education Committee who had drafted the Vocational Education Act of 1963, the bill was written in Bottoms' office. Perkins was used to working with Bottoms on job-related education legislation, and he and a retired House staff member drafted and edited the bill. As Jack Jennings, who worked

extensively with Perkins before founding the Center on Education Policy, remarked, “It would have been appropriate to call the 1984 law the Perkins/Bottoms Act.” Jennings has called Bottoms “the most dedicated and hardest-working person I know.”

How we talk about things, what we call them, matters a great deal. So it was fitting that one of the revisions in Perkins IV called for the use of the term “career and technical education” rather than “vocational education.” That change reflected the work of Bottoms and others over many years to alter three longstanding perceptions: that academic



Opening session of the 27th High Schools That Work Staff Development Conference (2013). At its height the conference drew over 80,000 participants.

and vocational-technical pathways are by nature separate; that the latter is inherently inferior; and that academic pursuits are related tenuously, if at all, to careers afterward.

“High school vocational education used to be the third track,” says SREB president Dave Spence. “There was college prep, and general ed, and then voc-ed.” The Perkins Act laid a foundation for “joining more robust academic courses with CTE into coherent programs of study that prepare students for multiple options after graduation,” says Kirsten Sundell, SREB's director of product development and communications for career pathways. “And it continues to govern CTE in the United States to this day.”

Then came High Schools That Work. Spence, at the time SREB's vice president of educational programs, set up a quality commission and asked Bottoms to be on it. SREB had extended its work to K-12 only a few years before, and the goal was to advocate for academic skills not as separate from vocational skills, but as a *way of learning* that would benefit students in either

path. “Gene's idea was to talk to vocational directors across the south,” Spence says, “He really put career tech on people's radar.”

The SREB State Vocational Education Consortium that arose from that commission's report, with Bottoms as its first director, later became High Schools That Work. The program now stands as the nation's largest school improvement initiative. Starting from 28 pilot sites in 13 states, HSTW has grown until its key priorities and practices to raise student achievement and graduation rates are now employed by some 1,200 schools in 30 states.

In keeping with Bottoms' emphasis on transitions and connections, High Schools That Work was soon joined by sister programs Making Middle Grades Work and Technical Centers That Work. “The middle grades,” Bottoms has said, “are where we need to begin to plant the idea that school is connected to each student's future.”

Technology Centers That Work, formed in 2007, provides high-quality CTE studies to high school students at over 180 sites

Bottoms with members of the Commission on Career and Technical Education at the Governor's Mansion, Frankfort, Kentucky 2014.



in 18 states, helping students, in Bottoms' words, "to understand linkages between education and career goals." TCTW, he says, provides "the last chance many students get to acquire important skills for jobs that need them in a constantly changing workforce."

Though Bottoms has co-authored over 200 articles, reports and columns, SREB's commission reports are among the most important publications during his tenure. The titles alone speak volumes: *A New Mission for the Middle Grades: Preparing Students for a Changing World*. *The Next Generation of School Accountability: A Blueprint for Raising High School Achievement and Graduation Rates*. And *Credentials for All: An Imperative for SREB States*.

Bottoms' latest initiative may turn out to be one of his most lasting legacies. Advanced Career, itself the culmination of a career, offers everything a school needs to be sure it works — from curriculum to assessments to extensive training and support for teachers. The goal is for students to master complex academic and technical concepts and graduate ready for workplaces, technical colleges and universities.

And, it's important to note, not *or*. The key to AC is options. The program, as Bottoms explains, is not a choice of college ready or career ready but a coupling of both. In more than 20 states and 150 high schools it has offered students new pathways and the inspiration to follow them. Advanced Career aims to do for CTE what Advanced Placement courses have done for academic studies, but by way of a learning platform that's more applied and contextual. "It flips the switch for those students who aren't sparked by traditional teaching styles," Bottoms says. "This is what modern career and technical education looks like."

*Atlantic* editor James Fallows visited Camden County High School in 2014 for an article titled "High School in Southern Georgia: What 'Career Technical' Education Looks Like." In 2001 CCHS saw barely 50 percent of its students graduate. "Now that is up to 85%," Fallows wrote, "a change that the career instructional specialist who showed us around attributed mainly to the school's application of programs from the Southern Regional Education Board. CCHS has the best AP record of high schools in its part of the state."

Bottoms has been the recipient of awards over the years — the Harold W. McGraw Jr. Prize in Education and induction to the University of Georgia Alumni Hall of Fame

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are among his favorites — but this kind of success in the classroom is its own reward.

"I can think of no one who's had as profound of an impact on CTE, and the education reform movement as Dr. Bottoms," says Kimberly Green, executive director of the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium. It's a sentiment echoed by virtually everyone in the field.

And he isn't finished, which will surprise absolutely no one who knows him. "I hope to spend some of my retirement years supporting Advanced Career," Bottoms says. AC has allowed him to refine his views on career tech, voiced here in a February 2017 article:

Let me be clear: CTE's purpose is *not* to train students with a narrow range of skills for a single industry in

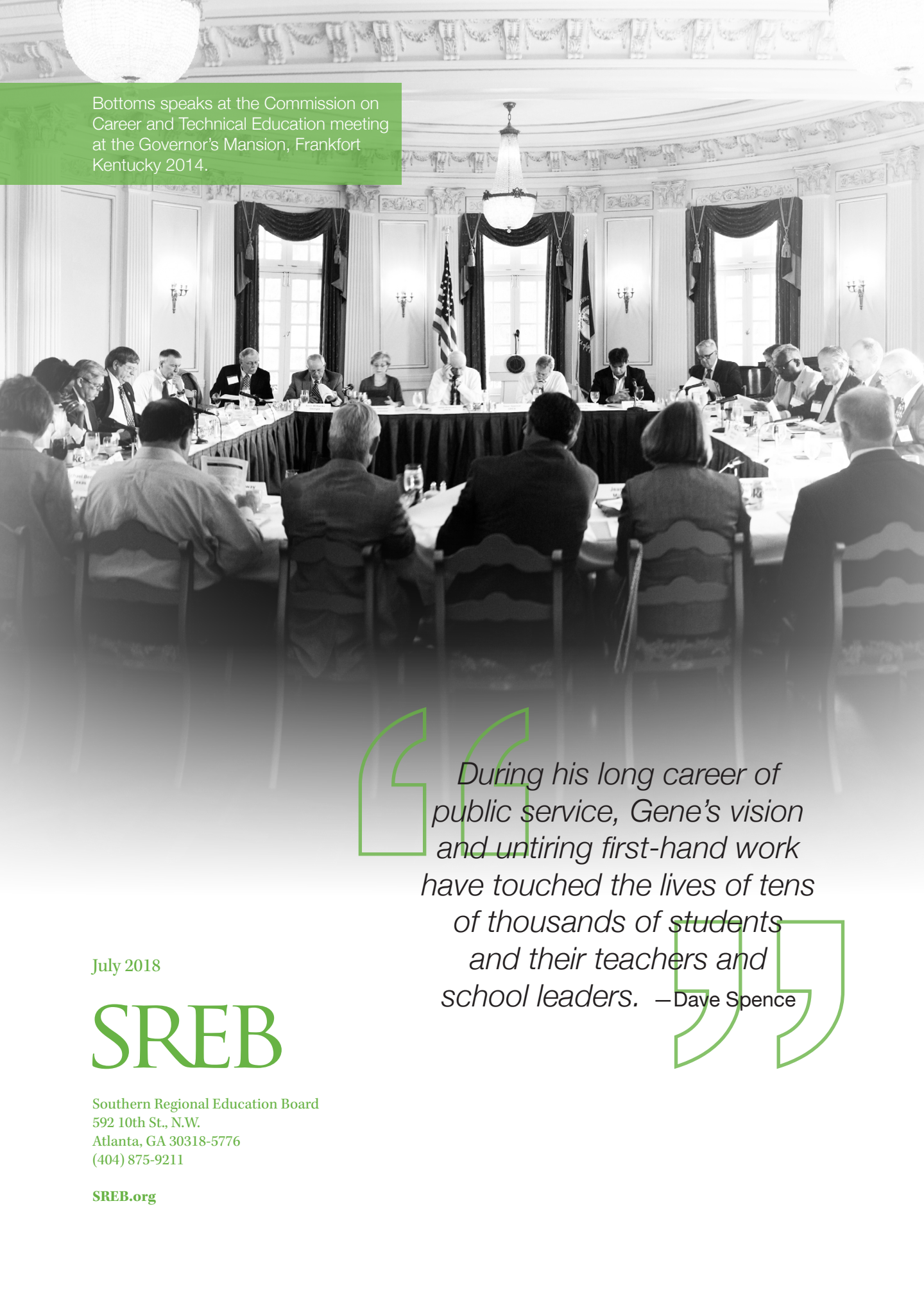
a particular place. In SREB's vision of career pathways... intellectually demanding technical courses are taught alongside a college-ready academic core, helping young people acquire the broad base of knowledge, skills, experiences and habits of mind they need to make informed choices about their education, careers and lives.

That relentless focus on real people, rather than abstract data or ideas, shines through in a moment from a PBS interview, when he is asked why he created HSTW. "Most of us," Bottoms said, "come to believe in ourselves when an adult first believes in us. When we started doing this work, there were literally hundreds of thousands of students in high school who belong-ed to no one. No one knew them."

Thanks in large part to Gene Bottoms' efforts, those students don't have to be invisible any more, and neither do their paths forward.

Bottoms with Teri Quinn Gray, president of the Delaware board of education at the SREB annual meeting in Naples, Florida, June 2015.





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*During his long career of public service, Gene's vision and untiring first-hand work have touched the lives of tens of thousands of students and their teachers and school leaders. —Dave Spence*

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