

Bush's Mexican Guest Worker Plan to Push English; But White House Won't Have Proposal Ready in Time for State Visit of President Vicente Fox

The Washington Post

September 1, 2001 Saturday, Final Edition

Copyright 2001 The Washington Post

The Washington Post
washingtonpost.com

Section: A SECTION; Pg. A08

Length: 901 words

Byline: Mike Allen, Washington Post Staff Writer

Body

President Bush is developing a Mexican guest worker program that would encourage participants to learn English but will not have a plan ready when Mexican President Vicente Fox visits next week, administration and congressional officials said yesterday.

Bush is considering a guest worker program that would be limited to temporary visits, as well as a more controversial version that would provide a road to permanent residency status for some of the 3 million to 4 million undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States. The administration has said it has no intention of proposing blanket amnesty.

The president will announce his goals for the program while Fox is in Washington for the first state dinner of the Bush administration. But White House officials said hopes for reaching a specific agreement have been dashed by the difficulty of working out the mechanics, and by opposition on Capitol Hill to broad amnesty for illegal workers.

"The immigration issue is one that is a complex issue," Bush said yesterday as he demonstrated the new White House Web site. "We've made progress on principles."

The slow pace comes as an acute disappointment to some of those close to Bush, who developed ties to Mexico as Texas governor. Republican officials also believe that a successful guest worker program could help make inroads with Hispanic voters, a top priority of the White House political apparatus.

The White House announced yesterday that the two presidents will hold a joint Cabinet meeting, then travel to Toledo, Ohio, which has a large Hispanic population, as a symbol of their desire to improve a relationship that some U.S. administrations have been accused of neglecting.

"I'm thrilled at the progress we're making with Mexico," Bush said. "What you'll see is that our administrations -- mine, and that of Vicente Fox -- are cooperating better than any administrations in the past, on a wide range of issues."

The English requirement would be part of an effort to build support for the program with the U.S. public, including previous generations of immigrants. "Bush wants the American public to hear, 'These guys are coming here to work, not to be on the dole,' " a top Bush adviser said.

Bush's Mexican Guest Worker Plan to Push English; But White House Won't Have Proposal Ready in Time for State Visit of President Vicente Fox

A congressional official said an assimilation requirement is seen by the administration as "something which, in order to push this to fruition, they can give to conservatives and others who would be reluctant to embrace the plan, by showing these workers share our language and values."

Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) opposes a guest worker plan that leads to amnesty, permanent residency status or citizenship. Reps. F. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.) and George W. Gekas (R-Pa.) have vowed to fight any reform efforts until the Immigration and Naturalization Service is overhauled.

Bush said Fox, who is pushing for blanket amnesty, realizes that the program "requires a willing Congress."

"We'll be discussing principles, starting with people need to be treated well and treated respectfully," Bush said. "And then it makes sense for the United States to help match a willing employee with a willing employer."

Democrats and labor unions have criticized Bush for focusing on Mexico, but the Bush adviser said the administration will make it clear the quest worker plan is "Mexico first, not Mexico only," opening the door for similar programs for other countries.

Officials said Bush is responding to one of the criticisms of his planned immigration reforms by ruling out an overly generous shortcut for the undocumented workers. "He doesn't want to do anything that would put people who may be illegal ahead of a line, ahead of people who have waited patiently while being legal," White House press secretary Ari Fleischer said.

The congressional official said workers in the quest program might be able to get in line for legal status by paying a penalty, or agreeing to work for a certain period of time, but would not have to leave the country to start the process.

Fleischer said Bush "does not want to create a program that has incentives for people to come to the United States illegally." Fleischer said he expects some issues will remain for discussion between the countries after Fox departs.

Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which opposes more immigration into the United States, said a delay in reform efforts may cause a backlash by Hispanics and hurt U.S. relations with Mexico. "This whole thing has blown up in the president's face," he said.

Angela Kelley, deputy director of the National Immigration Forum, said the delay could hurt Bush politically. "They're handing the keys over to the Democrats," she said. "People have been expecting something."

Also yesterday, Bush announced that his four priorities for the fall are the economy; education; opportunity, including his "faith-based" legislation; and security, including defense, Medicare and Social Security. "All of us in Washington need to be thinking about how to grow the economy," Bush said. "And I've laid out an economic growth plan, starting with tax relief."

Fleischer said Bush "is going to focus like a laser beam" on his four categories. The phrase echoed President Bill Clinton, who promised the day after his 1992 election to "focus like a laser beam on this economy."

Staff writers Mary Beth Sheridan and Cheryl W. Thompson contributed to this report.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Bush's Mexican Guest Worker Plan to Push English; But White House Won't Have Proposal Ready in Time for
State Visit of President Vicente Fox

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); AGREEMENTS (90%); US PRESIDENTS (90%); FOREIGN LABOR (90%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (89%); CITIZENSHIP (89%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (89%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (89%); AMNESTY (89%); TALKS & MEETINGS (79%); US CONGRESS (78%); UNEMPLOYED PERSONS (78%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (76%); GOVERNORS (75%); VOTERS & VOTING (74%); CONSERVATISM (71%)

Person: VICENTE FOX QUESADA (89%); GEORGE W BUSH (79%); PHIL GRAMM (59%); F JAMES SENSENBRENNER JR (58%)

Geographic: TOLEDO, OH, USA (54%); TEXAS, USA (92%); OHIO, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (95%); MEXICO (94%)

Load-Date: September 1, 2001

End of Document