



Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Tony Bennett
U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce
February 10, 2011

When I took office as Indiana's elected Superintendent of Public Instruction in 2009, I set out to provide all Hoosier students a world-class education that would prepare them for the demands of our competitive, global economy. I realized quickly our students had a lot to overcome. The state of education in our state, as in many others, is challenged. In Indiana, more than 15,000 third graders can't pass the English/Language Arts portion of our state assessment. One in four students fails to graduate high school with a meaningful high school diploma, and of those who do graduate, 25 percent require college remediation. Too few of our students take the kind of rigorous high-school coursework needed to compete for seats in our top universities; only 12 percent are passing Advanced Placement exams.

My first step upon taking office was to set clear, measurable and high expectations for student achievement. By 2013, 90 percent of Indiana students will pass both the English/Language Arts and Math portions of our state's assessment—the ISTEP+. Twenty-five percent of all high school graduates will receive a score of 3, 4 or 5 on at least one Advanced Placement exam, a 4 or higher on an International Baccalaureate exam, or receive the equivalent of three semester hours of college credit during their high school years. Finally, 90 percent of Indiana students will graduate from high school with a meaningful diploma. Two scoreboards, one in my office and one on display for Statehouse visitors, track our progress toward attaining these aggressive goals.

We are forging a bold path to tackle Indiana's education challenges head-on and to achieve our 90-25-90 goals for Indiana students. We start with the principle that every decision we make must be focused on doing what is best for our school children, and that has meant engaging in difficult conversations about the long-standing practices that for too long have favored adults over children. Second, we realize we didn't find ourselves in this situation overnight; there was no one policy or event responsible for degrading our system of schools. It came as a result of years of complacency, inaction on various complex difficulties, and fear of change. Therefore, our plan to address it must be comprehensive. No single solution will give all students the high-quality education they deserve. Our approach is to attack all of the problems simultaneously from multiple angles. We know that's what it will take to transform our current system into one that expects and supports excellence for all students.

Our education reform agenda, which is currently before our General Assembly, reflects this comprehensive approach—and it will require an all-hands-on-deck commitment to succeed. We are confident our legislators will take advantage of this historic opportunity to answer the call to help Indiana’s students, and we are encouraged by the bipartisan support we are receiving from state and national leaders.

The agenda is bolstered by our successful efforts to improve Indiana’s schools over the past two years. We have made tremendous gains despite the nation’s trying economic landscape. Indiana leads the nation in access to advanced placement exams with more minority students than ever before taking the exams. We have seen more students graduate from high school and pass our state assessments. We have also revamped the way teachers gain and renew their licenses in Indiana to better reflect student needs, ensure content-area expertise and allow highly-qualified career changers more pathways to teach in our highest need communities.

We have rolled out Indiana’s Growth Model, and it is the centerpiece of many of our reform efforts. It allows us, for the first time, to measure how much students learn over the course of a school year—no matter their achievement level, income, race or ZIP code. Perhaps most important, it gives us a more accurate view of which teachers are driving the biggest academic gains in the classroom. Often, the most remarkable success stories are happening in our most disadvantaged communities. Teachers who were never recognized by a system that looked only at test scores are standing out with Indiana’s Growth Model for moving kids 1.5 to 2.5 grade levels in a single school year. While we understand this new tool won’t solve all our problems, it has been a game-changer in the way we measure academic success in our state.

We are taking the first steps right now to intervene in our chronically low-performing schools, where more than 24,000 Hoosier students are doomed to educational environments that fail to provide them even the most basic skills they will need to enter college or the workforce. Currently, 20 schools could face state takeover at the beginning of the 2011-12 school year.

Looking ahead, we believe this is the moment for Indiana to emerge as a leader for other states to follow when it comes to innovative and aggressive education initiatives that put student success first—and our three-part “Putting Students First” agenda is the type of comprehensive reform plan Indiana’s students need.

The three pillars of Indiana’s “Putting Students First” education agenda are the following:

1. **Identify and reward great teachers and principals by giving local leaders flexibility to promote excellence.** Legislation before our general assembly this session would require local corporations to be centers of innovation that develop fair, multi-faceted, annual evaluations for teachers and principals that will clearly differentiate effectiveness and consider student performance and growth. Once in place, these

evaluations should be used to determine pay increases, classroom placement and professional development requirements.

2. **Enforce accountability but allow local flexibility to turn around our persistently low-achieving schools.** Our proposed legislation creates a clear roadmap for turning around our lowest achieving schools by outlining procedures for state intervention and giving school operators at our worst schools the freedom to make the bold moves necessary for swift, dramatic improvement. The legislation would also create a “Parent Trigger” that would allow a majority of students’ parents in a school to petition for early state intervention in a failing school.
3. **Give all families a voice and high-quality educational options for their children.** Legislation is currently before our General Assembly to enforce stricter accountability for charter schools, create more quality charter authorizers, and create a needs-based opportunity scholarship for families to take a percentage of state funding to educate their children in participating non-government schools. The legislation would also create a “Parent Trigger” that would allow a majority of students’ parents in a school to petition for conversion to a charter school at any time.

What’s more, Indiana students deserve an education system that demands academic results and isn’t focused on complying with outdated and unnecessary laws and regulations. I believe part of the reason our students are falling behind is a lack of appropriate leadership at the state and federal level. We must strike a balance between expectations, accountability, flexibility and support.

As a former teacher, principal and school superintendent, I am a strong believer in local control. Indiana’s school leaders are in a better position to know what’s best for the students in their communities. They know which programs will work for the children they serve. They understand the cultural and economic factors unique to their districts, and they are in the best position to drive innovation. My role as state superintendent is to set high expectations for student performance and enforce strict accountability measures. In between, particularly if we are successful this legislative session, our locals will have full flexibility to act on behalf of their students’ best interests.

We will put guardrails in place to ensure quality and provide support, and then, we will get out of the way and let them do their jobs. I tell Indiana’s superintendents to blame me for setting such rigorous goals. I don’t tell them how to reach those goals, but I am happy to let them use me as a shield so they can do what they need to do for their students. I would love to see the federal government to do the same for states.

Part of this must involve some deregulation. In Indiana, we have heard loud and clear from our superintendents too much red tape is in their way. This session, we’re doing something about it

with deregulation legislation. Earlier this week, Indiana's House Education Committee debated this legislation that would allow a school or school corporation to apply to our State Board of Education for a waiver of one or more laws or regulations that stand in their way. Just a handful of laws or rules would not be eligible for waiver. Applicants would be required to demonstrate how the waiver would help improve student learning.

As a department, we are also taking a close look at the red tape we place on schools. For example, we recently reviewed the more than 120 data collections we ask of local school corporations to see whether the data collected is focused on our top priority—student achievement—and that the data we collect is actually put to good use. With those parameters in mind, we have identified more than 30 collections that can be suspended or consolidated with other collections, thereby reducing the burden on local leaders. Now, we are looking to the federal government to cut through unnecessary red tape, as well, and we have started discussions with the U.S. Department of Education to find ways to do just that.

The best way the federal government can drive improved student performance is by setting high expectations, enforcing strict accountability measures, and allowing states the flexibility to work on behalf of their students. In an ideal world, the federal government would simply say, “Meet goals X, Y and Z. Here are some guidelines, but ultimately, we don’t care how you get there. Figuring out your path to success is up to you because you know best what your students need. If you do not meet the goals, you will not get federal dollars.” This is a new paradigm at the state and federal level, and it’s one that keeps the interests of students at heart.

Speaking of education dollars, that’s another area where we need to change our thinking. We must fundamentally change the conversation from “How do we get more money for education?” to “How do we get more education for our money?” Decisions we make on education spending cannot be made in a vacuum; they must be married with our decisions about education policy. We absolutely must review every spending decision through the lens of what will most benefit students in our classrooms. In Indiana, we’re moving in that direction.

For the first time in our state’s history, school funding formula legislation will begin its journey in our House Education Committee, where it can be considered in relation to our education reform legislation, before it moves to the Ways and Means Committee. It may be a small step, but it sends a clear message that we need to think critically about the way we currently pay for education in our state. In tight economic circumstances, the time has never been better to have these discussions. More money isn’t the answer to our problems. Too often, it’s not a lack of funding or resources that keeps individuals, states and nations from achieving their goals; it’s a lack of courage.

And courage is exactly what Indiana is asking from its lawmakers this legislative session. It’s also what we ask of our leaders at the federal level. We cannot afford to keep doing what we've

been doing. Indiana's education challenges aren't unique; our problems reflect a crisis facing our entire country. Our nation's economic success and maintained global position depend upon our ability to gain quickly significant ground on the education front.

As a man who has made educating children his life's work, I know from experience when you hold children to high expectations, they will rise to the challenge. As a school leader in southern Indiana, I set similar high expectations for my teachers and staff. And they never let me down. The same is holding true now, as school corporations across our state are innovating and driving incredible gains in student achievement.

I pledge this to you: if you set the bar high for states, put guardrails in place to ensure quality, provide support, enforce accountability, give states the flexibility to achieve those goals, and then get out of our way, we will not fail America's school children. We will not fail to prepare our nation's future leaders. But you must act now on behalf of all children. We cannot risk leaving another generation of students ill-prepared to compete with their international peers. It is a moral imperative for all of us to act on behalf of students and leave adult comforts and concerns aside to do what is right for them.