



House Education and Labor Committee Testimony: Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Tony Bennett

With the belief that great teachers and leaders are critical to student success, Indiana's goals and vision for education place a strong focus on reforms aiming to improve instruction and school leadership. We have taken an all-hands-on-deck approach to developing and implementing these reforms. Our *Fast Forward* reform plan—the plan Indiana's Department of Education (IDOE) submitted as its Round I federal Race to the Top application—reflects our commitment to realizing significant gains in this area. Indeed, it can be argued that every component of the reform plan helps support, secure, reward, train, and retain great teachers and school leaders for Hoosier students.

IDOE's Action Plan, developed when I took office in January 2009, outlines a clear strategy for improving instructional quality and enhancing school governance and leadership. Our goals in this area require legislative and administrative success, and thus far, we have accomplished a great deal on both fronts. In fact, as we wrote our *Fast Forward* plan to compete in the federal Race to the Top competition, we did so fully confident that whether we were able to secure funding or not, the reforms within the plan would comprise our reform agenda for the next three years.

Today, as we endeavor to improve the quality of instruction and leadership for Indiana's schools without additional federal funding, we look to our past accomplishments to inspire our future efforts for Hoosier students. Moreover, we charge ahead with a commitment to maintaining flexibility and autonomy for our local school districts. For while it is our job, at the state level, to set a high bar for achievement, provide support and enforce accountability, it is the job of our local school districts to reach this bar with strategies best suited to meet the needs of their unique student populations. Likewise, Indiana stands behind the efforts of the U.S. Department of Education to fundamentally change the ineffective status quo in American schools, and we welcome their leadership and support as our state works to implement bold reforms targeted to improve student achievement in Indiana.

Never before have there been such coordinated efforts by federal, state, and local education stakeholders to put the full focus of our system of schools where it belongs—on students. Our greatest challenge is to unite aggressively against all forces working to oppose reform that benefits school children. In Indiana and states across the nation, the most striking, most powerful impediment to improving instructional quality and school leadership has been those organizations charged, principally, to protect the integrity of the teaching profession: teachers' unions.

While there are examples of local teachers' associations joining Indiana's school leaders to make powerful decisions that improve and protect instructional quality, state-level union leadership is unwilling to support our reforms aimed at developing meaningful, consistent and fair teacher and school leader evaluations.

It is no secret that, across the nation, teacher and school leader evaluations are largely ineffective. According to a study by The New Teacher Project, less than 1 percent of teachers are evaluated as poor or ineffective. A survey by the same group found that teachers themselves find little value in evaluations. They do not receive informative feedback or constructive criticism, and they feel evaluations are subjective and inconsistent.

Indiana aims to comprehensively overhaul teacher and school leader evaluations by collaborating with teachers, principals and other stakeholders.

Our efforts have been guided by core principles about the role and importance of evaluations. To begin, we believe any meaningful evaluation tool must substantially consider student achievement growth in its determinations. To that end, Indiana calls for teacher and principal evaluations that base 51 percent of each educator's rating on student growth data. Every other aspect of evaluation must be tied to student learning, as well. IDOE worked with leaders from the Indiana State Teachers Association and the Indiana Federation of Teachers in a series of meetings to develop a framework for these evaluations. During the course of these work sessions, both organizations expressed agreement, in principle, that tying educator evaluations to student achievement growth was crucial.

Next, evaluations must reflect actual educator performance. Indiana proposes four rating categories resulting from these evaluations: Highly Effective, Effective, Needs Improvement, and Ineffective. The ratings must be analyzed annually to ensure the distribution of teachers and principals in each of these categories is accurate, and evaluations must be declared invalid if ratings have been inflated.

Most important, these retooled evaluations must be factored into decision-making. They should be used to inform professional development, compensation considerations, promotion, retention, and reductions in force. Our best educators should lead professional development experiences to share best practices. They should be eligible for additional compensation. They should be the first considered for promotions and special opportunities, and in times of severe economic distress—like today—they should be the highest priority for retention when considering reductions in force. On the other hand, ineffective teachers or those needing improvement should receive targeted professional development and support. If they do not improve enough to meet the instructional needs of students, they should be removed from the classroom.

In every other profession, workers are evaluated by their ability to get the job done. An educator's top priority is to educate young minds—regardless of their achievement level or ability upon entering the classroom—and they should be rated according to their ability to educate children. Using student growth data assures that teachers are recognized for their ability to give every student what they deserve: at least one year's worth of learning over the course of one school year. Principals should be evaluated not only by student growth but also by the effectiveness of the teachers under their leadership.

My father was an electrician, a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. His union took responsibility for his training and credentials, made sure he didn't burn any houses down, and policed its member electricians. Teachers' unions should do the same by ensuring the highest-quality licensing standards, professional development and evaluations. Teachers' unions should have high expectations for their members and protect the integrity of the teaching profession.

In Indiana, our state-level union leaders seem to tout the need for professionalism and high standards, but they aren't willing to back the reforms necessary to boost instructional quality for Hoosier students. Although they expressed agreement and cooperation with our intentions to create evaluation tools tied to student growth and even helped develop an initial framework for these evaluation tools, when it came down to publicly supporting our reforms with their local union leaders—they failed to make even a lukewarm endorsement of our efforts.

We had hoped Race to the Top would provide the catalyst we needed to overcome the significant obstacles to improving instruction and school leadership. Yet, Indiana is well-positioned to implement a great many positive initiatives without additional federal funding or the support of teachers' unions: We have already put

many reforms into action, and we continue to build public and stakeholder support with the power to provide the momentum we need to do more in the future.

Beginning with our legislative successes, Indiana's recent progress to reform education is commendable. With the passage of legislation in 2009, teachers now receive qualified immunity from lawsuit for reasonable acts of discipline to maintain control of their classrooms, and dangerous loopholes have been closed to make sure teachers accused and/or charged with dangerous offenses have their licenses revoked. Our legislature also eliminated charter school caps, creating more opportunities for students and more choices for their families.

We've strengthened our regulations regarding teacher preparation and licensure to make sure all secondary teachers have content-area majors in the subjects they teach. This same rule revision removes burdensome regulations that require teachers to spend thousands of dollars to renew their licenses by allowing them to use the professional development credits they already earn toward their renewal. New teachers will be required to work closely with building leaders to hone in their skills and improve, and all teachers will be able to make their licenses more marketable by adding areas to their licenses by passing content-area exams to prove their competence. Equally important, our new licensing regulations take the first step toward creating alternative paths to the teaching profession by allowing new nontraditional programs to be approved in the future.

Many programs already exist in Indiana to drive more nontraditional, highly-competent adults into the teaching profession. The Transition to Teaching program, Wilson Teaching Fellows, Indianapolis Teaching Fellows, The New Teacher Project and Teach for America are examples of alternative pathways that put knowledgeable, well-trained adults in some of our most high need subject areas and schools. We are also in the process of establishing programs to identify and train highly effective school leaders, an effort closely linked to our efforts to close the achievement gap and turnaround our lowest achieving schools.

By slashing our own department's budget, IDOE was able to realize over \$1 million in savings. With that money, we created the Graduation Rate Incentive program, providing financial rewards to teachers and principals in schools that most increase the number of students graduating from high school in four years.

At the heart of the majority of Indiana's reform efforts included in our *Fast Forward* plan—including educator evaluations—is Indiana's Growth Model. We began developing the model in 2008, and we now are weeks away from fully rolling out this important longitudinal data system. For years, the state relied solely on achievement test data to assess student achievement. This provided us only a snapshot of student performance and encouraged educators to focus their instructional efforts on those students closest to passing the standardized achievement test. Understandably, this myopic view of student performance has been criticized as inequitable and inaccurate, as it fails to adequately assess our lowest achieving, highest achieving, special needs and Limited English Proficiency students.

Indiana's Growth Model groups students with their grade-level peers across the state who achieve a similar score on our state's ISTEP+ examination and tracks student growth within these groupings. For the first time, we will be able to assess how much growth a student has achieved over the course of a school year.

The implications of this new longitudinal data system are immense. We will be able to identify exceptional educators more fairly and accurately. Consider the student who enters Grade 4 reading at a first grade level. A teacher who can help that student gain two and one half years of learning by the end of the year should be commended for her efforts, not penalized because the student cannot read at a fourth grade level. Likewise, a teacher whose students achieve at extremely high levels but fail to gain one year's worth of learning in one year may be less effective than a teacher with lower achieving students who achieve higher growth.

IDOE plans to link this growth data to teachers and principals, school buildings and school districts. Already, the general public can view growth and achievement data for K-8 schools and districts. All schools are placed on a four-square grid, and each school is rated according to growth and achievement.

Additionally, the Growth Model can be used to track effective and ineffective teachers back to the institutions that prepared them for licensure. IDOE and the Indiana Commission for Higher Education are exploring the possibility of a public rating for Indiana's teacher preparation programs.

The Growth Model will be a powerful tool for parents and the public, who will be able to see how well their schools are educating students in a transparent format. Community and family involvement are critical to our reform efforts, from their active involvement within our schools to their support and high expectations for students' success.

Another initiative has been invaluable to our efforts to increase public awareness of the need for radical reform in our worst schools. Public Law 221 was passed by the Indiana General Assembly in 1999 to hold schools accountable for student performance, inform parents and the public, create incentives for ongoing and meaningful improvement, and establish major educational reform.

PL 221 mandates state support and intervention for schools that rank in the lowest category for four consecutive years. More than ten years after the law's passage, the State has only now begun to intervene in Indiana's 25 lowest achieving schools. We sent technical teams to assess these schools and develop turnaround plans with school leaders. The schools are not required to sign on to these plans, but if they fail to demonstrate improvement, the state has the authority to intervene by closing schools, replacing or eliminating school leaders and teachers, or assuming state control of the buildings. Make no mistake: we will not hesitate to intervene if necessary.

Our efforts to increase instructional quality and leadership are a strong aspect of turning around our lowest achieving schools, as low performing schools—especially those with high-poverty and high-minority student populations—tend to have the greatest number of ineffective teachers and principals. Ensuring a fair distribution of high-quality educators is critical to narrowing the achievement gap in Indiana and across the nation.

The department has already begun the process to make Indiana's school accountability system more transparent and meaningful, as well, and plans to incorporate the Growth Model in the future. PL 221 uses five category labels based on student performance on the ISTEP+ exam, student improvement over three years, and federal Adequate Yearly Progress status. These categories (Exemplary, Commendable, Progress, Watch and Probation) fail to clearly communicate the true condition of our schools and, therefore, hinder reform efforts. Indiana is working to change these labels to A-F letter grades to increase transparency and public awareness.

Finally, we are supporting Indiana's teachers and school leaders and arming them with the tools they need to improve instruction. Indiana is part of a consortium of states working to adopt the Common Core Standards. These standards will be clearer, more concise, and will provide our students an internationally-benchmarked framework of the skills they will need to succeed in a 21st century, global economy. Indiana's existing academic standards are excellent, but they are cumbersome and difficult for educators to navigate and use. Merging our own standards into the Common Core will provide teachers a more accessible and useful tool. IDOE is also developing curriculum maps to help teachers plan daily instruction to incorporate all grade-level standards over the course of the school year.

The Common Core Standards are a great example of how the state can set the bar for high achievement without compromising local schools' ability to custom tailor curricula to unique student populations. The

State isn't concerned with how schools meet (or exceed) expectations; our job is simply to make sure students can demonstrate proficiency in the standards.

In all, education in Indiana has come a long way in little more than one year, but we still have a great deal to accomplish. Our *Fast Forward* plan is our reform map for the future, and the most important piece, in many ways, is requiring meaningful teacher and principal evaluations that directly influence decision-making. Our students' performance can only be as high as the effectiveness of the teachers educating them. Our teachers' effectiveness can only be as good as our school leaders demand and the support they provide. Unfortunately, implementing meaningful educator evaluations will continue to be one of the greatest challenges we face in transforming our schools because of the powerful organized forces opposing accountability for the adults charged with educating our students.

In Indiana, state law concerning teacher evaluations makes it difficult to tie teacher evaluations to any type of student performance data, including growth, because collective bargaining contracts can be used to override attempts to include student performance data.

IDOE could work through the Indiana General Assembly to make meaningful evaluations a real possibility, though the teachers' unions' significant investment in many state legislator campaigns could make negotiations difficult, to say the least. Likewise, our experience negotiating with the teachers' unions to prepare our Race to the Top application has made it abundantly clear these organizations are committed to opposing efforts to improve educator evaluations.

I believe fundamentally that we must create high expectations for the adults in our system of schools, just as we have set for our students, and we must hold them accountable to meet those expectations. If we fail to do this, we will have failed to create transformative change that benefits all school children—despite all else we may accomplish toward that end.

Our hope moving ahead is that public, political, and parental outrage and demand for aggressive education reform will continue to build. As we shed more light on the appalling inequity and the tremendous failure of many of our schools to provide our young people even a chance at success in this complex, global economy, we stand ready to take ownership for the problems and take action to provide a better education for these children.

As federal, state and local education stakeholders and elected officials unite without regard to political affiliation to do what is truly best for America's children, the powers working just as tirelessly to oppose our efforts must relent to a national outcry for change.