

Search for Solutions

Turning K-12 Challenges Into Opportunities

By Tom Schuman

This is the part of the story in which I am supposed to write clever words and phrases that set the stage for our roundtable participants to provide knowledge and insights. Not today, but don't worry; you will still get the expertise.

The topic is K-12 education: opportunities and challenges. David Shane, president and CEO of LDI Ltd. and a member of the State Board of Education, takes care of the opening with his answer to the initial question: What do you think is the state of K-12 education in Indiana today compared to 10 years ago?

Shane: "I think it's a vastly different set of challenges that K-12 faces because the world to which K-12 sends its students has changed so dramatically. We are undergoing a renaissance, global expansion and a modern industrial revolution all at the same time.

"The living requirements have changed dramatically, the work requirements have changed dramatically, the financial circumstances have changed dramatically. The students have to be prepared to some extent in exactly the same way – the fundamentals remain the same – but the students themselves are different, the environment is different.

"Therefore, I think the system's challenges are different. I would collapse that down into the biggest challenge is that we have to educate a broader range of students to a far higher standard."

Read on to learn how school days, dollars to the classroom, district consolidation, teacher quality and more fit into the above challenge.

The panel includes:

- **Shane**, who in addition to the roles cited above, served as Gov. Mitch Daniels' senior policy advisor for education and employment in 2005 and 2006. Learn more at www.ldiltd.com
- **Vince Bertram**, superintendent of the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation. Learn more at www.evscschools.com
- **Derek Redelman**, vice president for education and workforce development policy at the Indiana Chamber. Learn more at www.indianachamber.com
- **Nate Schellenberger**, president of the Indiana State Teachers Association. Learn more at www.ista-in.org

Additional challenges

While all agreed that Shane hit the proverbial nail on the head with his opening comments, Schellenberger adds that social implications are a major part of the changing dynamics. That includes everything from disciplinary issues in the classroom to job losses for parents at home.

Bertram notes that in the business world those that adapt to the new economy are the ones that do well, while others go out of business. "In education (if we don't remain globally competitive), we see numbers start to dwindle. We see fewer graduates; we see fewer students entering postsecondary education with the skills necessary to be successful there.

"The single most salient issue for me is high school dropouts. We're graduating more students today than we've graduated in the history of American public education, yet it's not enough and a high school diploma isn't enough. How we take that to the next level is a tremendous challenge for us."

Redelman says it's important to phrase the challenge in the proper context.

"Too often we ask, 'Are we better than we used to be?' Most people agree we're better than we used to be," he affirms, "but the better question is, 'Are we improving as quickly as we need to, are we keeping up with the rest of the world?'"

Time on task

Asked whether changes to the traditional calendar (longer days and/or an extended school

year) are part of the answer, Redelman points out that students from around the world are “moving to 200 days, 210 days,” while Indiana is entrenched in a 180-day school year.

“At the same time, they’re (international students) not going 8:00 to 3:00,” he continues. “They’re going into the afternoons; they’re doing evening work; they’re doing Saturday schools. This is not an all-school issue. It’s also a community and social issue where parents are driving their kids into additional learning experiences. But I think we can do more as a system to expand upon that as well.”

Schellenberger offers that his organization is supportive of the concept. “I think the thing that teachers will look for is a little more flexibility in how to use the time. Flexibility in how those hours are used is almost as important as more hours.”

An entirely different kind of flexibility might be required, according to Shane. Would two shifts, one beginning at 7:00 in the morning and another ending at 7:00 or 8:00 at night, work? Is that possible with the financial system of “stair-stepping compensation, (which) every year increases the cost of public education as long as the same teachers and the same administrators are in place?” he asks.

“It’s a really fascinating challenge for the overall system,” Shane comments. “It’s happening in many places that are unencumbered by school board rules, State Board policies, labor contracts ... where they can sort of make it up fresh.”

Charter example

A model to look at, Redelman contends, is in the state’s charter schools. There are various examples of charters with more days in the classroom, longer hours and increased access to teachers. Those schools are offering that “not just within the current cost structure, but actually for less given that charter schools don’t receive any of the capital projects or transportation funds that traditional public schools do.”

Shane agrees that examples are prevalent, including among traditional public schools where an “enlightened collaboration” is occurring.

Administrators and teachers strive for alternative arrangements to help meet student needs, Schellenberger offers, but he admits “it’s somewhat more limited.” There is that “flexibility by design that those charter schools have that by current design the (traditional) public schools don’t have.”

Bertram states that the diversity within school districts makes it a tremendous challenge to implement State Board policy or state laws that impact schools equally.

“I think charter schools have been a very positive thing for our state and for our nation. I think giving families choices is very, very powerful. Our ability to attract

industry to our region is going to be incumbent upon our ability to provide outstanding education and programs for families – and provide real choices for families.”

Noting that if the charter school legislation was to “encourage innovation and creativity and for people to look at this a little differently,” Bertram goes on, “I would suggest that if that’s a real solution, then giving all schools that flexibility makes a lot of sense to me.”

Dollar distribution

Both Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels and recently elected Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett have been preaching about the need for more education dollars to find their way to the classroom. Bertram and Schellenberger report that the current fund accounting system does not allow that. If money is saved out of the transportation budget, for example, it cannot be used to purchase instructional supplies or hire an additional teacher.

“To me that’s a powerful incentive,” Bertram relates, “to say to school districts, ‘If you can save money here, we’ll allow you to use it someplace else.’”

Redelman notes that several past efforts to break down the funding barriers have been opposed by the education community. It’s been “almost to a point of they’re asking the state to protect them from themselves. From the business community’s perspective, there’s been a longstanding interest in allowing districts to set the priorities that they want to set and to spend their finances accordingly.”

Bertram shares details about another type of flexibility that deserves the attention of local government officials across the state. A collaborative organization in Vanderburgh County, headed by the school corporation, will take over the purchasing for all schools (traditional public, charter, Catholic, etc.) as well as city and county government. The city’s four-person purchasing department will send



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Indiana Chamber of Commerce*

two people to the consolidated organization and two positions will be cut.

The superintendent gives numerous examples of anticipated savings in fuel costs, payroll administration, health care insurance premiums and more.

“We are more than doubling our purchasing power as a county,” he emphasizes. “We have to start looking at things from a regional perspective or a state perspective as opposed to these microcosms and protectionism that has taken place. The reality is we can retain some of that local control. We don’t have to give that up to say we’ll collaborate with you on these areas to save us money.”

Sizing up the districts

School district consolidation is another hot topic. It is seen as both a way to free more dollars for classroom uses, but more importantly to offer additional learning opportunities.

Shane admits there is no magic formula for the right number of students in a district, but it is obvious “there are districts that are in need of more focus at the classroom level and less administrative function. If you can have fewer administrators, a slightly broader geography and more classes taught by better trained teachers with better resources, do it.”

Schellenberger cites a positive example in Warren County – three high schools that have maintained their independence with one superintendent and one set of administrators. He says the ISTA “certainly would not be opposed if locally anyone wanted to look for efficiencies in that manner.”

Bertram adds that his corporation or others could easily absorb administrative functions of smaller districts. The results would be savings for the smaller entity without increased costs for the larger one. So why the uproar and lack of movement in this area?

Redelman: “I think it starts with a misunderstanding because that word consolidation has a common understanding in the public’s eye and that is what happened in the ’60s in which small communities lost the only schools they had. They see this word coming about again, and they don’t like it.

“Another issue is we’re again focused a lot on adults. This issue is about streamlining adult functions, and yet I think there are a lot of adults out there who don’t want their functions streamlined.”

Talking about teachers

While finances always seem to be part of the mix, teachers are at the core of the education effort. A most troubling statistic for Schellenberger is that “within the first five years, in certain environments, half the teachers who come into the education system are gone.”

He continues, “Once they’re in a classroom, we need to find ways to support them, especially in their formative years. As

an educator, I remember my toughest year was my first year. We need to provide that type of support in terms of continuing quality professional development. And to a large extent, I think the word quality is something that’s been missing.”

Redelman offers that if flexibility is critical to changing dynamics outside the classroom, why not apply that to those who are in front of the students. “We still have a very tight pipeline for getting people into the profession. We’ve played around the edges on finding new ways to get people in, but haven’t really changed from the model that a young adult, some might say a kid, at age 18 basically needs to decide that they are going to be a teacher.

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Two areas of concern for Bertram are content knowledge and pay – or lack of both.

“One of the things we should do is require teachers to earn an academic major in their content area, as opposed to spending half our time or a much larger percentage thinking about teacher education courses. The other,” he maintains, “is if we’re going to attract people to the areas of shortage (primarily math and science), we have to look at economic incentives.”

Just as the education system’s challenges have increased, so have the responsibilities of the teacher, according to Shane. “In any subject, the teacher has to have a degree of subject matter knowledge now that is vastly higher than before.



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“A huge shift has been that in the old days you could teach a teacher how to teach. Today, the school of education, the university, has to teach the teacher how to induce learning in a child,” he asserts. “We are shifting from teaching to learning. No different than the business world has had to shift for technology purposes, for competitive purposes, for globalization purposes. That shift is massive and the schools of ed, in my opinion, are way behind the curve, maybe fatally behind the curve in producing and attracting and educating the kind of person that’s needed for that.”

Motivation, tied to fair compensation, is another critical component in Shane’s opinion. He summarizes: “One of the things we’ve got to do, just like business had to do, is figure out how to induce your partners, the teachers and their representatives, to be at the table in the spirit of flexibility and open-mindedness within a confined fiscal universe to find a new system for that motivation reward.”

Compensation conundrum

Performance pay pilot programs are taking place in various districts and communities around the country. While individual teacher union affiliates are participating in those projects, the national union perspective has been one of strong opposition.

Schellenberger provides his insight. “When you say performance pay, everybody has a different idea as to what that is. If you ask me, ‘Do I support individual performance pay for an individual teacher?’ I say, how can you determine that? There’s not been a test designed that a student would take that would indicate that.

“We certainly have supported school-based performance when a school shows improvement,” he continues. “But it’s very, very difficult to say that any one teacher is doing a better job or not doing as good a job, because maybe I’m doing a good job in the eighth grade because the seventh-grade teacher did a great job of bringing them along.”

Redelman references a Tennessee model that is focused on the growth of individual students over a series of years. That, he says, refutes the argument of fairness in teachers inheriting students of different abilities.

Shane believes the education world could adapt the business approach of base pay, an annual bonus for reaching progress goals and long-term compensation as a reward when significant benefits have been provided to the shareholder. Within districts, “teachers would receive an attractive wage for the base work, would have an incentive to make annual growth progress for the students at every grade and would receive a fair consideration when the student actually graduated and was deemed ready to go on in life.”

If movement takes place toward an incentive-based system

(for teacher pay, placing instructors in hard-to-staff schools, etc.), Bertram declares, “We have to be much more sophisticated in our metrics and how we’re going to measure this. It would take a significant amount of work for the people that are doing those evaluations and collecting the data to make sure that we have accurate data that we hope changes behaviors.”

Business at the table

Panelists were asked for little answers to a big question about the relationship between the education and business communities.

Schellenberger says, “The thing that we all have to understand is we all have the same objective. The more people that we have employed, the more people who are on tax rolls, the more students we have in our schools, the better it is for everyone.



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Indiana State Teachers Association*

For businesses to have the ability to continue to expand and to grow is important for schools as well.”

Bertram agrees, noting strong participation from business presidents and CEOs on his superintendent’s business council. “We have to collaborate. We have a common mission, common goals – to make sure that we have strong workforce development, that we have an opportunity to grow economically as a community and that we continue to enhance our quality of life. We can do wonderful things if we work together.”

With districts operating similar to businesses outside the classroom, Redelman believes that “if schools were willing to open their doors and if business folks were willing to walk through those doors, there’s a lot that schools could learn

on the non-academic side, on the operations side from the business community. I’m not sure right now there’s as much willingness on either side to do that.”

He adds that businesses need to be “clear in what they need from schools. I think the schools are willing to listen to a large degree. Businesses need to communicate those needs and then also see the outcomes.”

Taking the request for brevity to heart, Shane concludes, “It’s just the future.” But in response to the earlier topic of meeting today’s challenges, he offers: “We can solve this ourselves or the world will solve it for us, and the world’s solution is a very, very ugly solution.

“It’s the closure of a school; it’s the loss of the economic vitality in a community; it’s the destruction of life, hope and opportunity for individual students if this stuff doesn’t work.”

To avoid that, Shane believes a close look must be taken at State Board regulations, school board policies, administrative procedures and labor contract provisions under one filter. “If it’s not adding educational value, let’s get rid of that constraint.”