



Head of the Class

Bennett Ready to Blaze New Education Trail

By Tom Schuman

When he was first elected governor in 2004, Mitch Daniels' straightforward message to legislators included the phrase "buckle up" in preparation for the change that was to come. Tony Bennett, who officially took over as state superintendent of public instruction on January 12 following his November election victory, may not have uttered those words, but the education community should be prepared for a "new ride" over the next four years.

Among the 48-year-old Bennett's past experiences are nine years as a science teacher, an unusual basketball coach-principal double duty at Scottsburg High School and most recently superintendent of Greater Clark County Schools.

Three days before his inauguration, Bennett participated in the Indiana Chamber's First Friday Conference Call. He discussed key issues with Derek Redelman, Indiana Chamber vice president for education and workforce development policy, and answered questions from participating Chamber members.

Here is a summary of his comments.

Motivation for the job

Bennett: "I've been an educator, seen education from almost all walks – a private school student who actually went to 12 years of private schools, a private school teacher, a vocational school teacher to a traditional K-12 assistant superintendent and superintendent. So I've seen this game from all the chairs, and I've probably complained from about every one of those chairs about education, how we can make it better, how we can do a better job for kids.

"And I had learned very early in my life that if you're going to complain about something, you ought to put your money where your mouth is and you ought to put yourself in a position to do something about it. If I really believe that in this day and age we have to make our kids globally competitive – and I don't believe we're doing it – and I think I can do a better job, then I need to step up and do that. That was actually the motivating factor."

Defining the agenda

After comparing the role of school superintendent to that of the business CEO, Bennett states, "One of the things I maintain is that we have to put everyone at the table – the educators, the instructional leaders and our business people – because the concepts of best business practices and educational ideas, and ideals, are not mutually exclusive. We need to marry those if we are truly to be successful.

“That is why I believe it is important for Gov. Daniels and the superintendent to have a consistent platform. If we are going to take Indiana education and put it at its rightful place – on top of the nation and on par with the rest of the world – the person who is ultimately in charge of this state, our CEO, and the person responsible for schools need to be on the same page.

“Our platform is quite simple, but I feel pretty bold.

“One of the things that happened over time has been the gradual erosion of the standard of discipline. (Bennett describes a common coaching term – slippage – that refers to a team not staying on top of its game, a coach allowing players to do some things later in the season that weren’t permitted early on). We’ve allowed slippage to occur. As that has happened, it has eroded the climate in our schools.

(While discipline was the top topic on the campaign trail), “Putting dollars to the classroom in our current economic climate is a very hot topic. The No. 1 thing we should be doing is spending our money wisely. This business of education is a competitive and expensive business, and we should hold our taxpayers’ investment in our business very dearly. And we should spend that so we get the most bang for our buck, which is in the classroom.

“Third is teacher quality – how do we recruit, train and hold accountable our teachers so that they are the professionals they went to college to be. We hear many times teachers want to be treated in our society as doctors and lawyers and elite business people. We believe we should do that and that comes with recruiting, compensation, training and accountability. The fact the governor and I have been on the same page since day one is very important.”

Elected or appointed

Bennett: “I believe, and will always believe, that the superintendent of public instruction should be an appointed position. I’m not showing my cards here, but after eight years, I would ask of you: ‘How much do you think has my game slipped as far as my day-to-day knowledge of the operations of a school and a school corporation?’ I think the person in that chair needs to be able to be connected and have the most up-to-date connection to the way schools operate and the challenges facing our schools.

“That’s one good reason for an appointment; it does impose a natural term limit. I stand very strongly on the position that this should be an appointed position.”

Money matters

During a State Budget Committee presentation, Bennett offered a 10% cut in the Department of Education operating budget (from \$10 million to \$9 million). That exceeds the governor’s call for an 8% reduction from state agencies. He



Tony Bennett answers questions from WXNT’s popular morning talk show host Abdul Hakim-Shabazz.

was asked what reaction he has received:

Bennett: “People were a little shocked. We need to change the paradigm as it applies to money for K-12 education. The paradigm has always been: How do we get more money for K-12 education? We’re going to have to change that paradigm to: How do we get more education for our money? If you look at the last four or five years, we’ve put \$776 million more into K-12, that’s over 12%, while student population has grown by less than 3%. Most disheartening is that the ISTEP scores are flat. We’ve proven that money isn’t the answer.

“Let’s try something new. Let’s create new structures for schools so they can get more student learning for their dollar. The response from legislators and colleagues has been a little shocked, some maybe a little upset. If we at the Department of Education expect schools to run efficiently and to look at administrative overhead and how we spend our dollars, the first place they should look at is the Department of Education to see if we are doing the same thing. We want to set a very clear example. We want to spend less so we can send you more to spend in the classroom, and we want you to do the same thing.”



Bennett, with his Republican colleagues at the party’s 2008 convention, anticipates a close working relationship with Gov. Mitch Daniels.

District consolidation

The Indiana Commission on Local Government Reform, led by

Joe Kernan and Randall Shepherd, called for school districts (not schools) of at least 2,000 students. The governor, in releasing his legislative agenda, put that number at 1,000 students (and noted that nearly 50 districts are currently below that number).

Bennett: “Frankly, I think that is dead on. Tony Bennett, left to his own demise, might have gone a little higher than that. We started on this path with Kernan-Shepard about efficiency, fiscal efficiency. If you listen to what the governor said, his position has to do with learning opportunities for

kids. And that concept should be the driver of this discussion.

"I applaud the governor for keeping the focus, the primary reason for looking at 1,000-student school districts, as being educational driven. That was the first thing he said. These kids don't have curriculum-rich course offerings to allow them to be globally competitive. I appreciate the fact that he gets it when it comes to this, and we started with making this a kid-centered argument. One of my concerns is that my colleagues say this should be totally local driven. By doing that, it's enabling adults to manipulate the conversation to what may be their own self-interests. We have to keep this discussion focused on student learning."

Working together

Asked about methods to bring more dollars to the classroom, he gives several examples:

Bennett: "The first place you're going to start is building partnerships. Near Kokomo, in eastern Howard County, the public library is in the school. There is a librarian with a master's degree. During school hours, the superintendent has to put a teacher in the library because that librarian with a master's degree isn't a certified media specialist under the state of Indiana regulations. So we waste dollars by taking teachers, who can be in front of kids in the classroom, and putting them with a librarian who after school hours can supervise kids. It makes no sense. We've gotten in our own way."

He offers another example from his role in Clark County schools, when he and the mayor were visiting an elementary school. What they found was the school maintenance crew mowing the grass, and city workers doing the same across the street at a park. They asked, "Why couldn't we do it with one?" and they did.

"We have to break down the walls and work together," Bennett emphasizes.



Greeting well-wishers, and signing copies of memorabilia, was part of the job on inauguration day.

Teacher quality

Bennett: "I am a huge deregulation guy. We've talked about deregulation in terms of creating new structure for schools so they can operate to meet kids' needs.

"At Prosser Vocational School (in New Albany), my job was to put the best professionals I could in front of those kids because they were going right out into workforce. We had a masonry teacher, Steve Terry. There is the Vocational Clubs of America; his kids sweep the competition every year. He has never been in a teacher education program. He was a bricklayer who had a tremendous way to relate to kids. We put him in a few pedagogy classes.

"We have that occupational specialist license for vocational schools. Why don't we have the same for chemistry and physics teachers? We don't have a better example than what President Obama did, appointing Arne Duncan as education secretary. He has never been through a traditional education program.

"We have to eliminate regulations, uncuff the hands of schools, treat superintendents like business people and judge them like business partners get judged."

Increasing accountability

Bennett: "We (superintendents and school corporations) are inundated with the number of improvement plans we have to submit. All those allow us to access money. One of the things we can do practically is develop a one-plan model. A school corporation submits one plan on continuous improvement that drives the improvement process. That would be very beneficial in terms of accountability; cut down a lot of duplication, unnecessary meetings and paperwork; and ultimately we could allow schools to access money off that one plan.

"I believe this in my heart, that the greatest injustice we can do to the impoverished, minority kids in our urban schools is use the excuse that they come from a disadvantaged home. I think excuses have to stop at the schoolhouse door."

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Tony Bennett, Indiana Department of Education, at <http://doe.state.in.us>