

GOVERNMENT LEADER *of the* YEAR



TONY BENNETT

**By Tom Schuman**

**D**efending the current education system is nowhere to be found when it comes to priorities for Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett. Despite serving in that system for more than 20 years as a teacher, coach and administrator, he simply wants to answer the question of how educators “can do a better job for our kids.”

Critics of Bennett claim he is moving too far, too fast.

Former colleagues cringe when he says it’s all about, “How do we get more education for our money?” instead of the traditional, “How do we get more money for K-12 education?”

They don’t buy into the phrase “fierce urgency,” borrowed from a Chinese immigrant who wrote that Indiana and the United States are playing education not to lose, while his native country is playing to win.

They don’t want a system that grades schools on an A-F scale. They testified at a public hearing that the current labels of “academic watch,” “commendable” and more were “confusing and that’s good. One commented that he or she never had to explain school performance, but will now.”

Bennett’s response:

“Tell that disadvantaged child who has been held captive in a bad school for another year of their life, explain to them why we should slow down,” he exclaims. “Explain to the young lady from Northern Indiana who said she was never taught the skills to pass her end-of-course assessment – and she wanted to go to college.

“This isn’t about me slowing down; this is about adults taking the opportunity, and I think we have a very small window of opportunity nationally and on a statewide basis, to really ride the perfect storm to throw us to the forefront of education reform. I think if we slow down, we’re going to miss it, and if we miss it we’re going to cheat a generation of kids. And that is what this is about.”

Teresa Lubbers has been fighting the education fight for nearly as long as Bennett – for 17 years as a state senator and currently as the Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education.

Asked about urgency, she replies, “We’ve been saying for years that the issue that matters most to this state is increasing the educational attainment of Hoosiers. The thing that’s so refreshing about Tony’s style is he’s willing to put everything on the line to build the case for better opportunities for students.

“When he takes what in many circles might be considered controversial positions, I think to be honest with you most of his positions are widely supported by Hoosiers at large. Nonetheless, when you’re advocating change, that is hard,” Lubbers continues. “Either you could wait until everybody agrees, and in the case of education reform you would never do anything, or you can build your most compelling case for moving forward and why that’s important and be willing to proceed, and he’s willing to do that.

“He’s so convinced, as many of us are, that (for education) we’re at a crossroads; we need to have real leaders willing to spill blood for these education issues, and he is.”

## **Educational background**

Bennett is all education, all the time (with some lighthearted moments in the mix). He grew up in Southern Indiana, attending Clarksville Providence schools. He tells the joke of how his Uncle Gene remarked that Elisabeth (Bennett’s sister, currently working in the field of educator preparation at the University of Central Florida) had never made a (grade as low as a) “B” in her life. Bennett’s father chimed in on the other end of the scale, ‘Neither has Tony.’

While attending Indiana University Southeast in New Albany in the early 1980s, Bennett was asked by John Moody, the director of secondary education, what subject he wanted to teach. Bennett replied that he didn’t care, that he just wanted to coach. Moody’s response, ‘When you decide you want to be a teacher, come back to see me.’ Bennett calls Moody a mentor and dear friend to this day.

He recalls 1987, while teaching in a science lab at Providence, hearing about the A+ education

**Pike Township elementary students share some insights on a summer program with Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett.**



package offered by Gov. Robert Orr and Superintendent of Public Instruction Dean Evans. He was excited about the prospects for moving education forward, but certainly never imagined that 23 years later he would be occupying that same office as Evans.

As desired, Bennett did enter the world of basketball coaching. After three losing seasons at his high school alma mater, he was encouraged to find a new job. With a wife, 3-year-old triplets and a 1-year-old child, he resigned without another position. After a year in northwestern Ohio, he returned “home” and enjoyed six highly successful seasons (four sectional titles and numerous wins against larger schools) at Scottsburg High School.

His teams played at a frenetic pace, pressing and shooting three-pointers to their advantage – not unlike Bennett’s all-in approach today to improving education. And while some have been heard to complain that he is “merely a coach,” Bennett makes an interesting comparison between the team elements of the two positions.

“People think the team aspect means it’s total collaboration, it’s total consensus. Part of our responsibility here is to set a vision and a direction for the education for our children and then to bring people along with that vision and direction,” he notes. “When I coached, I never sat down at the beginning of the season and asked the team, ‘What do you want to do this year? What offenses do you want to run? What defenses do you want to run? What drills are we going to do every day?’

“Yet, if you talk to educators, they kind of have that view that that is what we should do. We should all sit and decide what we’re going to do, how we’re going to do it, how we’re going to get there and you know, if we don’t like a piece of it, let’s start all over again,” he continues. “That’s not the way the world operates. I feel very strongly about collaborating and building a team, but at the end of the day I’ll be accountable for the direction of Indiana education and I’ll be accountable for the results.”

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## Top topics

Here are just some of the important issues Bennett and his team have tackled in less than two years:

- **Dollars to the classroom, or more basically termed “spending money wisely.”** Years of substantial annual increases in state funding allowed school leaders to avoid choices. Today’s economic reality has changed that.

Bennett: “What we need to start thinking about is how we spend our money. Are we spending it on things that get us the most bang for our buck? Are we spending it making sure



Bennett and members of his staff discuss follow-ups to the successful Season Openers initiative that made stops in nine communities around the state.

third-graders can read on time? Because we know if third-graders read when they leave third grade and go to fourth grade, guess what happens – they have academic success the rest of their lives. There’s a pretty strong correlation to that.

“First and foremost, let’s define our core mission. What is our core mission? It’s reading, it’s math, it’s the essential skills for student success. Then let’s decide how much of our expenditures we’re really putting forth toward our core mission. The people who are doing that have weathered this economic situation pretty well. The people who have said we want to continue what we have always done have basically seen that what they have to do is compromise (cut) teachers.”

- **Teacher quality, the number one school-based factor in determining student performance.** The Brookings Institution reports that four consecutive years of a child

having an effective teacher will essentially close the achievement gap.

Bennett and the State Board of Education have implemented changes in the way teachers are prepared, with a heavier emphasis on being experts in their subject matter in addition to the “how to teach” skills. In addition, Indiana is the first state working to align licensing standards for teacher education programs with student academic standards.



A scoreboard in his office reminds Bennett and Department of Education team members about some of the crucial student statistics.

“We should go out and recruit the brightest and best individuals to be in Indiana’s classrooms, we should pay them like the professionals we ask them to be and we should evaluate them like professionals get evaluated – which is based on their performance. There’s no secret to any of that,” he proclaims. “For those that are the best, hold them up in the highest regard because in my opinion this is the most noble profession on earth.”

Lubbers adds, “Most of us would agree that while there are many facets to education reform, nothing is more important than ensuring an effective classroom teacher. None of us have ever said that student performance should be the only factor,

## Away From the Office

*A few things you probably don't know about Tony Bennett:*

- He considers Bob Larkin, his high school principal who later hired Bennett, as “the greatest educational leader I ever met. Bob was a paraplegic, walked up three flights of stairs every day. He had the unique combination of being able to run a business (the school being the business), he was a tremendous instructional leader and he was a spiritual leader at the school; not in a religious manner, but the man knew how to move the school. I’ve never met a person who was all three. He personified everything I think we want school leaders to be.”
- Recently, Bennett participated in the Marine Corps Marathon. A long-time avid runner, he wanted to honor his son-in-law who is preparing for military deployment to the Middle East.
- At the time of this interview, Bennett had just finished reading a history book series from a namesake (but no relation) in William Bennett, who had served as education secretary and the nation’s drug czar. He, along with Teddy Roosevelt, is among Bennett’s heroes.
- Bennett says he does not sleep more than four hours a night, but when he wakes each day he insists it is with the thought that he is going to do what he can “to put the other 49 states behind Indiana – so our kids have the greatest advantage in the country.”
- Asked directly to share something little known about himself, he offers, “I would not say this very loudly, but I have a very soft side. I don’t show it very much. I get this energy rush that almost brings me to emotion. My mom was a first generation American, from an Italian family. All these things Italians do. We cry pretty easily. We laugh a lot. I think most people have this persona of me ... I’m an angry guy, I’m mean, I’m Draconian, and I think the people who know me well, they’d probably tell you that’s not true.”

one year of instruction. Many educators have been asking for a growth measure for years; they’ve been asking for the opportunity to show they were helping students progress.”

## Direct explanations

Despite the rhetoric and resistance from some within the education community, Bennett is quick to tell of lessons he has learned from those in the field and suggestions from across the

but it should be one factor that’s used in evaluating teachers. Tony has been very clear ... we’ve got to ensure everyone has a quality classroom teacher.”

Earline Rogers, a longtime state senator from Gary who was a teacher for 38 years, agrees that “now is the time to look at teachers and their performance. We’ve got to have a system in place in which we have the highest quality of teachers in our classroom. We have to get an evaluation system that we all agree on.”

• **New growth model, intended to provide a much more complete picture of individual student performance.** Bennett credits his predecessor, Suellen Reed, for starting the work on this important effort.

“It will be the game changer in education,” Bennett attests. “In the past, we have set this horizontal bar and asked do kids jump over it? Because of that, we’ve only received one dimension of information and we’ve only targeted services to address that one dimension – take those kids that are very close to jumping over that bar and give them service so they get over that bar. We’ve had less regard for the kids performing at the upper margins and for kids at the lower margins. What that has done is entrenched the achievement gap.”

Everyone is a winner, he proclaims, when this system is fully in place by the end of the current school year.

“It says we acknowledge that all children don’t come to us in the same place, all children need different things to get to their maximum potential and it enables us to assess schools and educators on their ability to provide a child at least one year of growth in

**Keeping the focus on students is the theme for Bennett – both as a teacher and in his current role.**



state that have been implemented. He has formed various cabinets and working groups that include superintendents, principals and teachers.

At the beginning of the current school year, Bennett and staff traveled to nine different locations around the state for Season Opener events. In addition to the professional educators, the audiences included school board members, community leaders and business representatives.

There were short presentations from the department on the initiatives previously mentioned, as well as common core standards, the third-grade reading initiative, school and teacher accountability, and more.

The reaction, according to Bennett: "I can't count the number of e-mails I have received from teachers who have said, 'I didn't like a lot of this stuff I was hearing coming out of the Department of Education. It makes sense to me now.'"

Spreading the message directly to all audiences is required, Bennett believes, to enhance understanding. It is an education reform message offered at the state level by two Republicans (Bennett and his boss, Gov. Mitch Daniels) and nationally by none other than President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

Kevin Chavous, an Indianapolis native and Wabash College graduate, is an education reform advocate and attorney in the Washington, D.C. area. A Democrat, Chavous helped lead strong charter school growth in the nation's capital as a member of its city council and served on Obama's education policy committee before the president took office.

Politics should not be a factor, he declares.

"This has emerged as the bipartisan issue of our country. There is a national imperative to allow our children to learn."

And the time is NOW. He repeated a message he first shared at an Economic Club of Indiana luncheon earlier this year, lamenting that more than 70% of African American males in

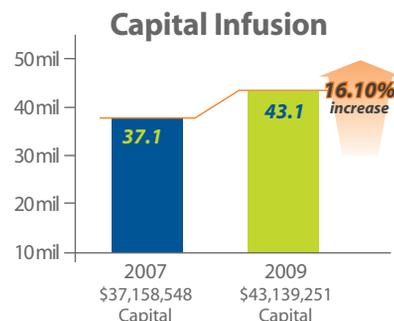
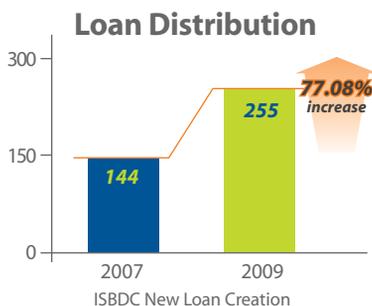
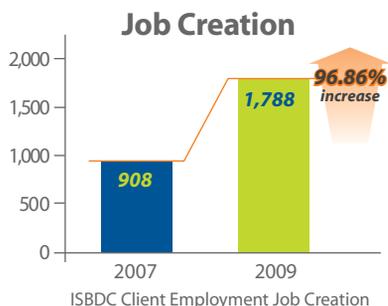


**Bennett looks forward to the challenge each day of helping lift Indiana's education system above those of the other 49 states.**



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**Spending time in his office behind his desk is a rarity for Bennett, who brings a strong sense of urgency for quickly improving educational outcomes for students.**

Indianapolis are underachieving or not graduating at all from high school.

“With the deficit we have in education, ‘too fast’ is not fast enough,” Chavous states. “You have to be inclusive and bring people into the fold, but you can’t allow those supporting the status quo to bog you down.

“It’s clear and obvious that Tony Bennett is emerging as one of the nation’s boldest and most innovative state superintendents. He’s not afraid to take on the status quo and make the tough decisions. He’s truly operating in the best interests of children. That’s why folks in education are paying attention to Indiana, much more so than in the past.”

### **Setting the stage**

Bennett wishes he could wave a magic wand to provide all young people with the stable home life and economic means to pursue the educational opportunity of their choice. What he and the state department can do, he counters, is help schools reach out and be the lead player in establishing a “culture of excellence.”

When his basketball teams (from a school of 750 to 800 students) played schools with 2,000 or more students, “We expected to win. And when we expected to win, our kids lived up to those expectations.

“It is literally sewn into my heart that the vast majority of our kids will give their hearts and souls to meet the expectations of a significant adult in their life; it is about culture, about kids knowing when they go to school every morning they have parents expecting them to achieve at high levels; it’s about teachers who set high expectations for every child; it’s about educational leaders holding everyone accountable for those expectations. That’s a culture we have to have in our education system.”

During his State of Education address in late August, Bennett repeated some lofty goals: 90% of students pass ISTEP tests and end-of-course assessments, 25% earn a passing score on at least one Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exam and 90% graduate from high school.

Lubbers commends the single-minded approach. “In every speech he gives, every policy he pushes, the student is at the center. For him, it’s not about adults or school systems; it’s about students and children. By keeping us focused on that, he’s been able to move forward on some very tough issues.”

### **Marching ahead**

Rogers, a Democrat like Chavous, does have concerns about the A through F grading of schools and the impact that will have on the morale of students, teachers and parents. While she contends that issue “has to be sold” to her, she is quick to credit Bennett for his efforts.

“What Tony Bennett brings to the table is much needed enthusiasm and exuberance. What he has been able to do is re-establish the place education needs to be, whether in the state or country, and that is on the front burner,” she offers. “He’s gotten everybody talking, and following that comes solutions for the problems.

“I marvel at his passion for education; in retrospect, when people look back at this period, it will be as a productive period in getting things moving.”