

Raising the Bar

Debating Educational Opportunities, Obstacles

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

“The future belongs to those who prepare for it.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

Indiana is known as the “Crossroads of America” for its network of major interstate highways that connects the state to the rest of the country. That nickname has helped define Indiana and promote one of its greatest strengths.

In the education world, Indiana stands at a different crossroads, facing a fork in the road of sorts. Many unknowns – such as the future of education reforms with the defeat of former Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett – cloud the way. At the same time, progress and opportunity help to provide a sense of direction.

We gathered a panel with some unique perspectives on the paths that lead to education success in Indiana as well as potential bumps in the road to avoid. Discussing the K-12 system, college completion and beyond are:

Our Participants:

- **Melanie Park**, 2012 Indiana Teacher of the Year
- **Hannah Rozow**, student representative, Indiana Commission for Higher Education
- **John Marshall**, executive director, Teach Plus, Indianapolis
- **John Chubb**, CEO, Education Sector, Washington, D.C.

Too much, too soon?

The reforms passed under Bennett’s leadership drew praise in some education circles and criticism in others, especially from teachers. Changes he advocated involving teacher evaluations, for instance, most certainly played a role in his defeat in the November election.

Park, who teaches reading remediation at Riverview Middle School in Huntington Community School Corporation, contends that misinformation and the rapid pace of the reforms that took place exacerbated teachers’ frustration.

“There were many teachers that struggled with that amount of change in a short amount of time,” she reflects. “I think that the election was a response to that.”

“When I was out in the field, a lot of the frustrations that I heard were particularly with the new teacher evaluation system. (I think there was) a misunderstanding sometimes as to how the policymaking works. Many teachers tended to blame one person, not understanding that it was a law and also not understanding that school districts had the opportunity to make choices as far as the teacher evaluation system that they would use.”

Adding to teachers’ frustration was a sense of helplessness. Many lamented the lack of opportunities to become engaged with the changes taking place.

Park’s yearlong sabbatical working with the Department of Education to “celebrate teaching” (she travels to schools and universities throughout the state to uplift the profession) is revealing that opportunities for engagement do exist; teachers just weren’t aware of them.

“Teachers are so busy; it’s hard to even realize that those opportunities are available,” she observes. “Many teachers in the field felt like they didn’t have a voice, but I have found in the last few months that really they could have – we just weren’t able to make that connection.”

Marshall, a former history teacher, stresses that keeping the reform momentum going is more important than ever in light of Bennett’s defeat.

“In terms of the pace of reforms, I think that there’s a lot of opportunity we still have right now,” he emphasizes. “It would be a tremendous disservice to Indiana if we were to backpedal in any way because we are in a really good place in terms of the amount of appetite for really making great progress towards that goal of having great teachers in front of our students.”

Chubb, whose nonpartisan research organization covers issues in K-12 and higher education, agrees.

“If we don’t have leaders like Tony Bennett who are trying to push the pedal to the metal, so

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to speak, we'll never get there," he declares. "The system has plenty of checks and balances and opportunities to make sure that we're not going too fast. I think all the danger is on the other side of going too slow.

"My guess is that Tony Bennett paid the price for outspoken leadership, but I think it would be unfortunate if other state chiefs looked at his example and thought, 'Well, I guess we'd better slow down.'"

Experience lacking

Consider these troubling facts: Many new teachers, particularly in urban classrooms, leave the profession before their fifth year. In 1988, the most common level of experience among teachers throughout the country was 15 years. By 2010, the most recent year data was available, that number had plummeted to one.

Retaining talented teachers in high-need areas is the mission of Teach Plus.

"We work with teachers in years three through 10 (in their careers) who are kind of at that critical point in which they decide whether they're going to make this a permanent career or move on to something else," Marshall explains. "We think that teachers need a voice, so we engage them in the policy process by connecting them with policymakers, getting them to opportunities to speak to decision-makers and also to take action themselves."

Why are so many teachers leaving the classroom?

Marshall attributes part of the problem to false perceptions. He notes that teaching is often viewed unfairly as a sub-profession. One way to reverse those misconceptions, he recommends, is to make the initial licensing process more stringent.

"In law, you have to pass the bar. In medicine, you have comps to pass. Maybe there's something along those lines that we could do to kind of raise the bar," he suggests.

Rozow, a junior at Indiana University, goes a step further, proposing that schools of education tighten admissions criteria.

"What you need is the best and the brightest going into school for it in the first place – people who intend to do it for the rest of their lives," she maintains. "If you raise the standards of getting into school, make it more difficult to become a teacher – even if you just leave it at those four years of preparation – you're going to attract people that are going to do an excellent job."

Another solution is to conduct effective teacher evaluations. The challenge: Defining what "effective" means and determining the proper weight of student test scores.

"I think the Indiana Growth Model does a really effective job at identifying the growth the teachers make – not necessarily what the starting point or ending point is, but how much difference there is between the starting point and ending point," Marshall counters.

"We've got to be able to say, 'These are our top performers

and we're going to reward them and compensate accordingly and appropriately because they're producing more in the same amount of time than some others are.' That's just the way professions work."

Rozow notes that the changing role of principals, who play an increasingly hands-on role in the evaluation process, also should be considered.

"Most research shows that the people who are supposed to be evaluating don't actually have the tools to be effective evaluators. If that situation could be addressed, teachers might be more open to having someone new coming into their classroom."

Park seconds that.

"Instead of being an administrator of the building, they (principals) need to become a teacher of

teachers, so supporting them in that role, like Hannah said, (can help ensure) that the evaluation is fair. There are many teachers that are embracing the idea of the evaluation; they just want to be sure that it is a fair evaluation."

She also suggests increasing the amount of field experience required for undergraduates and providing more support for first-year teachers.

Charter competition versus collaboration

The nation's first charter school opened in 1991 in Minnesota. Today, there are approximately 5,000 throughout the country.

The Indiana Chamber helped lead the way in enacting charter school legislation in the state more than a decade ago. Like others throughout the country, many have thrived, but some have struggled.

"I think the big policy question is not whether states are going to allow charters or not – 41 of them do now," Chubb remarks. "The question is: Are charter schools and public schools going to have more or less a level playing field with appropriate supervision?"

He notes that some jurisdictions

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*Hannah Rozow
Student representative
Indiana Commission for Higher Education*



*Melanie Park
2012 Indiana Teacher of the Year*



provide equal funding of the two types of schools, but a stark disparity remains in others. The relationships – and level of cooperation – between charter schools and traditional public schools varies as well. Chubb contends that the entities tend to operate in two “different worlds.”



“I think it really comes back to this human capital question of, ‘How are we going to get these high-performing teachers in front of the kids who need it the most?’ That’s the achievement gap right there.”

*John Marshall
Teach Plus*

“My concern is that the traditional public school system hasn’t responded adequately to the competition and sort of taken up ideas from charter schools,” he contends. “But the charter schools for their part have not really become a sustainable industry, if I could use that term, and that interferes with their ability to become a better provider of education.

“There are plenty of exceptions to the pattern, but it’s a definite pattern.”

Despite some partnerships and exchange, the overriding sentiment is that charter schools and traditional schools are rivals – not allies.

“They (administrators) will tell us, ‘What are you going to do in your school to keep your students there so that they don’t go to a charter school?’ Park reveals. “So, right now that’s realistically where I see us – being in a competitive mode versus a collaborative mode.”

Marshall describes a new Carpe Diem school (the first was founded in Arizona) in Indianapolis that serves grades six through 12. It focuses on computer-based and face-to-face instruction in areas such as information technology, science and engineering, business innovation and entrepreneurship, digital arts and entertainment, and health sciences.

“Students work through modules and when they get to the point where they can demonstrate competency, they’re assessed on it,” he explains. “If they don’t pass the assessment, they can’t move forward until they actually work with a teacher and they sit down and do some one-on-one instruction. That’s a really creative and new model and one that may be part of what the future will look like.”

If successful, he maintains, the curriculum could be adopted effectively by the public sector.

Chubb also emphasizes the value of competency-based learning. He asserts that the typical 180-day school year for K-12 students poses challenges due to its focus on days spent in the classroom rather than performance.

“My difficulty with the calendar is that we mark progress in education by time served, by days in the classroom,” he shares. “The reality is that some students need less and some students need more, and the important thing is the mastery of the subject.”

Building blocks

Start early! That’s the resounding consensus when it comes to childhood learning.

“One thing we struggle with in higher education is trying to remediate kids once they’ve come to college,” Rozow comments. “That issue should have been solved far before they came to us. I think it starts from the very, very beginning.

“How can we get this message through earlier of how important college is ... so that they’re preparing themselves diligently and incorporating the teacher, (making it) a partnership so that when they go to college, they’ve been on that path for quite some time?”

One way to help predict future success is to evaluate students’ skill levels (reading and mathematics) upon completion of their third grade year. These provide an important benchmark.

Chubb notes that mastering the basics is crucial.

“It really does begin in the first three years of school,” he says. “The pattern that’s repeated over and over again for students who are not successful – they may drop out of high school or if they do finish high school, their skills aren’t very strong. And if they go to college, their chances of graduating are quite poor. K through three is where students learn the skills that they need to succeed the rest of their time in school.

“You still need to have great instruction and great teachers every year, but if students are entering fourth grade with strong foundation skills, they won’t find school to be such a turnoff – and it’s the lack of those foundation skills that leaves kids frustrated and then, eventually disaffected, potential behavior problems.”

Marshall notes that those who haven’t reached evaluation milestones can receive guidance to



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*John Chubb
Education Sector*

help get them on track.

"I know there's a lot of complaints about the amount of testing that the students do, but when we identify that a student is not reading adequately at the third grade level and we have the data to show that, then we can really respond through interventions in the way that those students need," he observes.

Guiding children on that path to career readiness typically falls on parents' shoulders. But what happens when the parents fail to make education a priority? Park says she intensifies her efforts to motivate her students and help them "begin to see a vision for their future that their parents really aren't providing for them."

In addition, she cautions against relaxing standards for students based on their home lives or backgrounds.

"We still have to set the bar high," she stresses. "It's not fair, but they're going to have to work harder because it's not really me setting the bar; it's life setting the bar. And I want to be sure that they have what they need."

Rozow agrees that empowering students to steer their own futures is vital in efforts to increase the college graduation rate.

"We need to ensure that there are support mechanisms for all students, but especially those first-generation students in the institutions themselves," she emphasizes. "Institutions are coming around to that – not as quickly as we may like, but it's happening."

She suggests a team approach to student advising, starting in the K-12 system, that would encompass three core issues: financial, academic and career.

"If someone takes an avid interest in a student, discovers their interests and then helps them translate that into something that is either college or career, I think we would see dramatic improvement (in college completion rates)," she asserts.

Head of the class

One of the goals under the Outstanding Talent initiative in the Indiana Chamber's *Indiana Vision 2025* long-range economic development plan says that by 2025, 90% of Indiana students will graduate from high school and be college or career ready. We asked the panelists: Can that be done?

"I think it's an important goal and I think it's an achievable goal," Chubb affirms. "I think these concrete outcome goals (being 'college or career ready') are more important than test score goals, which is where we've been the last decade."

Marshall echoes that sentiment.

"Absolutely it's an achievable goal," he proclaims. "Those are the kids who are now in kindergarten. We have the next 13 years to make that happen. I think that the systems we've put in place, especially over the last four years under Dr. Bennett – and even in the country as a whole – have increased the chances that we're going to be able to meet that goal."

"I think it really comes back to this human capital question of, 'How are we going to get these high-performing teachers in front of the kids who need it the most?' That's the achievement gap right there."

*The key is preparation,
whatever the race.*

Dennis Reinbold

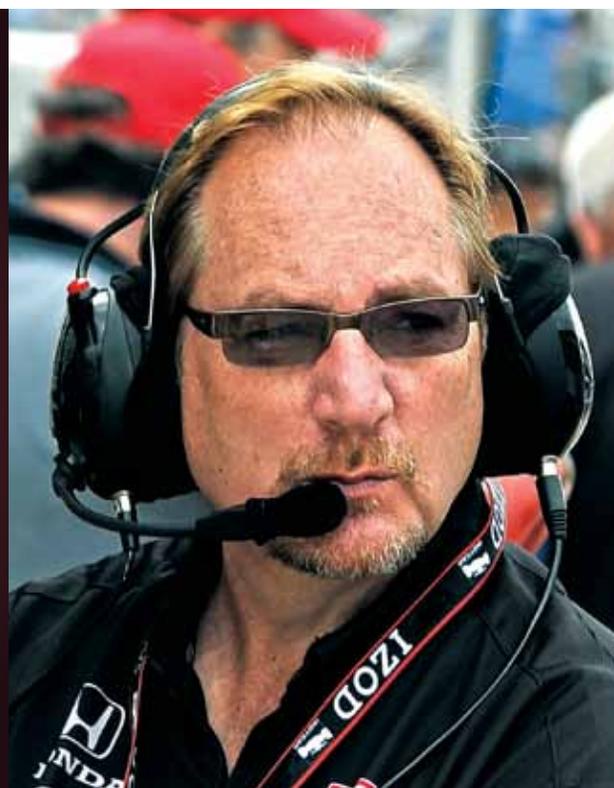
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