

'Best Buy' Schools Lauded for Efficiency, Focus on Quality Education

By Rebecca Patrick

It's a decision citizens, businesses and government continually face – how to spend their money wisely.

For Indiana's high schools, this delicate balancing act means managing financial resources while striving to provide a quality curriculum. Schools that accomplished this mission most effectively were recently recognized by the Indiana Chamber of Commerce with the release of its annual *Indiana's Best Buys* report.

Making the grade

The study, which was presented for the second straight year by Indiana State University, examined 350 Indiana public high schools and, for the first time, charter schools with the necessary available data.

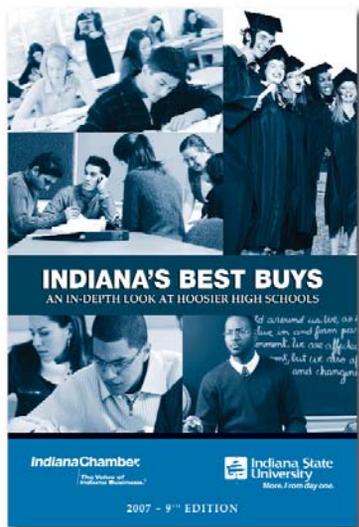
The Indiana Chamber developed a total school performance or quality index for each school. This quality index was then compared to each school's total expenditures per pupil to determine "best buy" schools and to each school's at-risk student rate, as measured by participation in the federal free/reduced lunch program, to determine "honor roll" schools.

The quality index was comprised of a number of factors: ISTEP+ pass rates, ISTEP+ Pass+ rates, graduation rates, SAT participation rates and average composite scores, and Advanced Placement (AP) passing scores. All data used in the Best Buys report were collected from Indiana Department of Education databases.

For 2007, 136 public high schools were designated as a "best buy" for giving taxpayers the most value for their money. Schools qualified for this honor in one of two ways: having a quality index above the state median and expenditures below the statewide median of \$10,196 per student, or with a quality index ranking that was 20% higher than the school's expenditures ranking.

From the best buy list, 31 high schools were put on the "honor roll" for excelling academically despite having at-risk student demographics above the statewide median.

Offers Dr. Lloyd W. Benjamin III, president of Indiana State University, "Education is the key to a brighter future, and providing quality education while being accountable for taxpayer dollars is a core value that all schools – be it at the high school or college level – should embrace. We congratulate



all of the schools honored in this report for that achievement.”

The intent of the Best Buys report goes beyond celebrating excellence, emphasizes Indiana Chamber President Kevin Brinegar, to encouraging schools to seek improvement in areas that need attention.

“Indiana high schools have the necessary resources to be among the best in the world. However, to be the best, everyone must work at continuously analyzing, reforming and/or maintaining quality instructional programs. We hope this analysis of schools’ current educational environments will help them in setting future goals.”

Best of the best

For 2007, six schools embody the outstanding achievement that can take place when there is a commitment to excel from the school, faculty, students and community. The top three schools from the best buy and honor roll lists are called “head of the class” members:

- Adams Central High School in Monroe (Adams County);
- Hauser Jr.-Sr. High School in Hope (Bartholomew County);
- Loogootee Jr.-Sr. High School (Martin County);
- Orleans Jr.-Sr. High School (Orange County);
- Signature School in Evansville (Vanderburgh County); and
- Western High School in Russiaville (Howard County).

On December 12, Indiana Chamber officials recognized the six head of the class honorees during an award presentation at each high school; all were first-time recipients of this top designation. Signature School, Indiana’s first charter high school, opened in the fall of 2002 after operating on a part-time basis for 10 years prior to that.

For Loogootee Jr.-Sr. High School Principal John Mullen, the head of the class award is affirmation that all the hard work has paid off.

“It’s just a tremendous honor to crack the top list, and it speaks volumes as to the job we’re doing at Loogootee. I feel like we’ve handled our money and our resources about as well as anyone could in our position,” he states.

“One of the goals I had coming in four years ago was to make us the best in the state (academically), and we continue to preach that. I credit our faculty and staff, but most especially our student body. This really comes down to the kids’ desire and the parents’ desire, and they’re the ones that make it happen. I feel like their support and the community support for the school is second to none.”

Data updates reflect current picture

This latest edition of *Indiana’s Best Buys* also includes a broader range of school performance data and a greater emphasis on high school graduation rates for the calculation of each school’s quality index.

“The addition of AP measures and ISTEP+ Pass+ rates is an attempt to give schools additional recognition for their attention to higher performing students,” Brinegar notes. “The additional weight on graduation rates reflects a growing confidence in those rates as the result of recent legislative changes.”

Another modification in 2007 was in how the Indiana Chamber



School officials and students from (top to bottom) Adams Central High School in Monroe, Orleans Jr.-Sr. High School and Signature School in Evansville celebrate being “Head of the Class.”

compared educational costs among schools. Capital projects and debt service funds were examined, along with the revenue received from the state’s General Fund, to comprise a school’s total expenditures per student. Previous Best Buy reports included General Fund revenues only.

“This adjustment was needed to provide an even more accurate picture of how wisely, or unwisely, tax dollars are being spent. We’ve been seeing an increase in use of these capital projects and debt service funds for standard operating costs – for such things as utilities or loans – and wanted to acknowledge that trend,” Brinegar explains. “Furthermore, with the widespread impact of high property tax bills on many Hoosiers, and acknowledging that local schools are a significant benefactor of that revenue, we felt it only appropriate to take a more thorough look at school spending.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: 2007 *Indiana’s Best Buys* report at www.indianachamber.com/bestbuys