

AHEAD OF THE CURVE

State Lauded for Efforts to Reshape High School

By Matt Ottinger

The passage of House Enrolled Act 1002 during the 2023 Indiana General Assembly was the latest gesture in the broader effort of rethinking high school in Indiana. The notion, backed by groups like the Indiana Chamber, has been to propel career-centered education and training programs to bring Hoosier K-12 graduates more in line with the needs of employers.

Among the highlights are expansion of work-based learning opportunities (think: apprenticeships) and career scholarship accounts, a new state fund that would enable high school students to shop for a variety of work-based learning experiences, technical coursework and other career-oriented options as its centerpiece.

Patricia Levesque and Quentin Suffren are the CEO and senior advisor of innovation policy, respectively, for ExcelinEd, a national education policy organization founded by former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush.

Levesque attended an Indiana State Board of Education meeting last September, during which she called the Hoosier state a leader in these efforts. Suffren elaborates:

“Indiana has made a conscious decision not just over one legislative session, but over multiple, to really think about how to create broader access to high-quality pathways for learners.”

He adds, “In the K-12 space, obviously the state has done a great job in overhauling its next gen level programs of study for (career technical education), but I think the coordination and collaboration across the Department of Education, the Commission for Higher Education, Department of Workforce Development, you name it – there’s been a really thoughtful way of thinking about it for learners at every level.”

Getting results

Policies and ideas are a great start, but what about outcomes? Quantifying outcomes is still a work in progress, but Suffren lauds Indiana’s dedication to tracking in this regard.

“I think beyond passing all those policies,



Robot boot camps around the state serve as examples of students working and thinking differently in – and out of – the classroom to help them prepare for future careers. (Amatrol photo)

(officials are) just very impatient and they want to see the results improve,” he surmises. “That means kind of never stopping in some cases, which is impressive to us at least, because a lot of states will pass policies and then just say, ‘Well, yeah, we did that.’”

In fact, a return on investment analysis is something ExcelinEd recommends to all states.

“It’s important to use either the data that you have or, if you don’t have the data, building in a way to collect that data and asking, ‘What are the actual labor market needs of your state?’” Levesque says. “What are employers actually looking for, whether it’s in a credential or a certification, and what are we actually producing?”

Making education serve students has become paramount, according to Suffren.

“I think for a lot of students, high school has lost its relevance,” he states. “It’s become more of a checklist of requirements that they have to meet in order to graduate, but then to go on to do what? So, the connection between high school and the world of work and the world after they graduate is still somewhat tenuous.”

Accounts and accountability

The aforementioned career scholarship accounts were a key component of Indiana’s HEA 1002 and a concept that’s drawing attention.

“Indiana’s the first (to enact this), and I’ll just tell you from the work that we do in other states, we’re pointing to it as something to pay attention to and watch,” Levesque reveals. “The thinking behind it is, ‘How do we give

students in our public school system, those sophomore, juniors and seniors, the ability to do more to bring some of that relevance?’”

She notes observers will watch how funds can be used. While workforce programs are ideal, she speculates that if a student wants to attend, say, a computer coding bootcamp or work-based learning experience but needs help with transportation costs, this could be a way to combat that.

Resistance to reform?

When asked if any groups, such as teachers unions, have pushed back on these efforts, Suffren reveals the short answer is “no.”

“Most of the issues we run into when it comes to educators is there aren’t enough who are qualified to teach some of the courses (they’d like to offer),” he clarifies. “So, if it’s career technical education, they’d love to offer something in renewable energies, but where do they find somebody who can teach that?”

“So, it’s a different sort of problem-solving situation than running into resistance.”

While Indiana continues to lead, Suffren notes that similar efforts have become a priority for legislators and governors in states of all political leanings.

“This is just one of those areas where people understand that for a lot of folks, the current kind of high school or kind of pathway into the world of work and postsecondary (education) is just not working for enough people.”