

Education Reform Act II

Time is Now for Systematic Improvement

By Rebecca Patrick

Connecting the dots couldn't be any simpler: If young people don't receive strong schooling in their formative years through high school, then they likely won't have the foundation needed for college or vocational success – thus impacting their earning potential and, ultimately, their quality of life.

Yet the vital importance of that rather obvious concept hasn't itself been enough to light a fire throughout the education establishment and the broader community. In the last few years, however, strides in certain areas have been made thanks in large part to an aggressive agenda by state political leaders.

The K-12 reforms last year in the Indiana Legislature – including a broad school choice law to let parents choose their child's academic home, school accountability measures (including letter grades for schools) and policies to increase the number of charter schools – are already producing positive results, but represent only one small piece of the puzzle.

To discuss where we stand and what else needs to take place to get Hoosier students better prepared for the global marketplace, BizVoice® turned to four business and civic leaders with a passion for education:

Our Participants:

Jim Edwards – president of Edwards and Associates, Santa Claus, and State Board of Education member

Dan Elsener – president of Marian University, Indianapolis, and State Board of Education member

Mike Kubacki – chairman and CEO of Lake City Bank, Warsaw, and former longtime chair of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce's K-12 policy committee

Chris LaMothe – chairman and CEO of Sherry Laboratories, Daleville, and Commission for Higher Education member

Building blocks

“What we did last year (with the reforms) was establish a structure that promoted or at least improved the idea that competition as part of the answer is now going to be part of the process; that the educational establishment will have to react to the competitive pressures,” Kubacki surmises.

“It's a good first step. But is incremental change going to really get the job done? Can we afford to be that patient? I think we can't.”

Edwards – who, like Elsener, also serves on Indiana's Education Roundtable – concurs on both counts. He is optimistic about the “valuable principles now in place structurally and operationally in the classrooms. I think certainly they will serve in the long haul, but we still have the huge professional development task ahead – to get the teachers and the administrators in the system on course and doing the right things at the right time.”

Opening up school choice is the most significant of the recent laws, according to LaMothe.

“We've set targets on test scores and we've done all of those kinds of things that try to raise the bar in the existing system. But the reality is the quickest path to real reform in the K-12 system is by offering choices to parents. In turn, that encourages parents to pay attention to education and hopefully will lead to involvement in their children's education.

“That is probably one of the single biggest potential drivers of real change in our K-12 system. I feel the lack of parental involvement is the most fundamental problem we have,” he contends.

While the panel agreed on several pillars that could make a profound difference in Indiana's education system, perhaps nothing drew as much attention or was repeatedly cited as the need

for parents to take an active role in their children's education.

Offers Edwards, "It's our most challenging task, to get to the parents before they (their children) get into the school system and to get them educated to the point where they will follow their kid(s) through their school career."

LaMothe points to the positive success of charter and magnet schools in which parents are involved and making decisions for their children's schooling.

"Those parents take responsibility for the importance of education for their children. But many, many, many parents are abdicating their responsibility – leaving it to the teachers and administrators to handle.

"We need to get some very bright people together to figure out how we educate parents and how we encourage them to have the tools to pay attention to their children; and most importantly, what it means for their children's lives – that is paramount," he stresses.

Elsener believes it's a touchy subject in part because "none of us are perfect parents." However, he fully recognizes "if the parents got things right, an awful lot of the problems in the schools would get better in a hurry.

"Children from a disadvantaged background can be taught; they can be taught well and they can be successful. We have proven that 100 times over. But too often, the monopoly status quo is defended," he charges.

Lack of urgency and reality

This entrenchment in the way things have always been done is striking and contributes to the lack of any palpable sense of urgency, Elsener notes.

"The truth-telling around what our young people need, the state's economy, the culture, our society needs have been obfuscated by the monopoly. If you run the one and only best system, you have to say it's okay, right?"

Contributing to the blinders about actual school performance – and therefore student preparation – is a be-true-to-your-school mentality, says LaMothe.

"I would argue that schools are a little bit like Congress. If you poll somebody on what they think of Congress, it polls very low. But if you say: 'What about your congressman?' then he or she polls high. And I think the same has been true of our school systems."

When you look at how far our K-12 education system has dropped by international standards, it's all the more disturbing, says LaMothe, that the alarm is not being heard by all.

"There are jobs all over the world that could be jobs here in the U.S., but they are located somewhere else because they have an educated workforce," he declares.

Adds Kubacki, "If all this just doesn't horrify you ... what we're willing to accept, and we've been accepting it for decades."



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*Jim Edwards
Edwards and Associates*

And some of the things that have been swept under the rug or simply ignored for a long time make you want to shake your head.

"It's ludicrous to have 20% to 30% (high school) dropout rates," Edwards states. "And we shouldn't have dropouts as critical as education is right now. This is something business has a huge stake in, having those people complete school and go on (to productive careers)."

Elsener recounts his tale of disbelief: "One of the schools the state's taken over this year had only 29% of its children pass ISTEP and they were telling us, 'No, you don't need to intervene here. We're figuring this out.' For six years (they were) figuring this out.

"In a business, if you were running a poor operation you might get six months, maybe six weeks. Because when the money stops coming in, you still have to pay people; it doesn't work well," he quips.

Last summer, Elsener attended many of the school turnaround meetings; it was an eye-opening experience.

"It's embarrassing how poorly run (some of) these (school) operations are. And it's mostly poor children without much power or clout that are pinned up in these places," he describes.

"Some of these people (educators/administrators) have been in these schools for years and have watched all of this,

Outstanding Talent Initiatives

The Indiana Chamber's *Indiana Vision 2025* report served as the springboard for this roundtable discussion. It contains the following education/workforce goals:

- Increase the proficiency of Indiana students in math, science and reading to "Top 5" status internationally
- Increase to 90% the proportion of Indiana students who graduate from high school ready for college and/or career training
- Eliminate the educational achievement gaps at all levels, from pre-school through college, for disadvantaged populations
- Increase to 60% the proportion of Indiana residents with high quality postsecondary credentials
- Increase the proportion of Indiana residents with bachelor's degrees or higher to "Top 10" status internationally
- Increase the proportion of Indiana residents with postsecondary credentials in STEM-related fields to "Top 5" status internationally
- Develop, implement and fully fund a comprehensive plan for addressing the skills shortages of adult and incumbent workers who lack minimum basic skills

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and it didn't matter. They still got a pay raise the next year, and they have their job. So the kids were being miseducated; they weren't being prepared for anything. It wasn't a safe school, and everybody got paid.

"I drove home so frustrated I about ran into a telephone pole. I said, 'How could adults watch this?' I'm mission driven; I can't watch children just being wasted," Elsener shares.



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*Dan Elsener
Marian University*

Neither could the Indiana Chamber, which earlier this year released a comprehensive long-range prosperity plan for the state called *Indiana Vision 2025*. One of its four key drivers is outstanding talent, which encompasses K-12 education, higher education and workforce development (see sidebar for further details).

One of the goals of that plan is to achieve a 90% high school graduation rate and preparedness level for postsecondary education.

LaMothe, who chaired the *Indiana Vision 2025* group, realizes it's a daunting task to try to reach that level in 13 years, but also says there is no alternative – and the target should be even higher.

"It's almost unconscionable to say 90% of the time. If you say in business that you're going to deliver a good product or service 90% – and 10% of the time you are not, you're out of business. I will argue that the job of educating our youth is maybe the single most important job of our society," he emphasizes.

Objectivity, culture and leadership

The question is how to get the ball rolling faster to do something about it. Before any systemic changes are made in K-12 education, one step all participants were adamant on was stopping the blame game.

"We all own it. We created this mess. It takes the commitment of everyone involved. ... It becomes too easy to say 'that parent's no good, the administration is no good, the taxes aren't enough,' and whatever we blame," Elsener asserts.

"I'd rather say that the teachers are good people, but the system hasn't been what they needed. The principals need more training and support, but they haven't been given the freedom to run the building.

"I think what's going to be at play going forward is innovation, the human capital, the creativity, the responsibility of parents now – I'm not just told where to go, I pick," Elsener continues. "It's a cultural change which takes years, but the underpinnings are already there: transparency, higher standards, transparency on those standards and the freedom to act for parents."

One tipping point to trigger change, believes LaMothe, could very well be "finding a source or a set of objective data that can be used by school boards, principals, teachers or parents to make an accurate assessment of their school system.

"Consistent, objective data is so critical; because if everybody has access to it, it forces school systems to look at themselves and allows parents to look at school systems and compare them," he explains.

Government leaders also need to continue to step up to the plate, according to the panel. In addition, many in the school system must do the same for the first time.

"We need more heroes," Kubacki determines. "There needs to be a process to encourage people to be that – not just to say, 'I wish more of us were like that guy.'"

Edwards concurs about the impactful effect leadership can have on learning. He cites a small high school in Petersburg where the administration has taken an active interest in properly preparing students for the world. Over 60% of the student body engages in the Project Lead the Way program, which focuses on a rigorous science, technology, engineering and mathematics (or STEM) curriculum.

Kubacki admits, however, what makes the school system situation so difficult is it has to be done to scale. He notes it's easier to change your core when you're a small business, for example. "But if it's 300,000 people, it isn't the same."

Regardless, LaMothe reiterates it's a long-term battle that will



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Lake City Bank*

and must be fought. “We are at the very beginnings of K-12 reform that is going to unfold over the next decade, and that’s only if we stay very, very focused and vigilant on pushing that through.”

College forces at play

When shifting the spotlight to higher education, affordability and productivity are high-profile issues that deserve the attention they are receiving. LaMothe, however, isn’t as worried as he was five years ago about students ending up at the wrong schools. For example, students attending the flagship universities in Bloomington or West Lafayette when a regional campus, community college or perhaps a private institution might actually be a better match.

“The universities have gotten so much scrutiny on being able to get kids out in four years. So what you’re finding is schools like Ball State, Indiana State and IU-Purdue, they’re becoming more selective, not less selective, about who comes on to the legacy campuses,” he notes.

What the universities are also doing, says the group, is dealing with too much remediation for students ill-prepared for postsecondary academics.

“That’s a massive cost for the taxpayers of this state. You have 12 years to get students prepared to be able to go on for their two-year-degree, four-year degree or whatever it is they want to go on to. But too many come in unprepared for that next level,” LaMothe declares. “Then the state has to fund the remediation that goes on.”

And often times being unprepared for the rigors of college hits the student’s bank account too, with a sea of debt piling up.

“They have to borrow money, they have to go five and six years after remedial classes, so they’ve got (up to) two years of loss of opportunity costs – they weren’t earning – and on top of

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that two more years of tuition and living. The dollar figure on it is staggering,” Elsener describes.

LaMothe notes that “when you talk to them, they don’t really get the concept of how deep the debt is, how long it’s going to take them to pay it back and what it will mean in the curtailing of their lifestyle as they try to pay it back.

“And unfortunately, a lot of it won’t be paid back. It’s a huge bill that is waiting to get paid, again, by the taxpayers of the state.”

Elsener decides it comes down to young people being poorly educated about their finances.

“You have the lost opportunity costs of being in school another year – let’s say \$40,000 in pay and benefits, plus you’re paying tuition for another year. I just don’t think sometimes we’ve communicated well with people what it actually costs them.”

Message to business community

More communication and involvement from companies to their workforce would also help move the needle further toward meaningful overall education engagement and reform.

Edwards offers up one such approach: “Internships are a very effective way for businesses to stay in touch and tied to the community.”

For LaMothe, it’s about options and doing everything one

can. “I believe education is the great equalizer. What my business peers can do – they are influential with their employees – is promote education and their own economy.”

He cites outside job skill training and tuition assistance as two steps employers can take to benefit both their employees and the company in the long run.

“Businesses across the state can do that. They can encourage their employees to get involved in their school systems, maybe even serve on the school board; in its own way that encourages improvement and success,” LaMothe reasons.

“Also volunteering at the schools, going to their children’s parent-teacher conferences – just encouraging (and giving time off for) that. There are a lot of things that employers can do to promote the importance of education.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Jim Edwards, Edwards and Associates, at jdwards@psci.net

Dan Elsener, Marian University, at delsener@marian.edu

Mike Kubacki, Lake City Bank, at Michael.Kubacki@lakecitybank.com

Chris LaMothe, Sherry Laboratories, at clamothe@sherrylabs.com

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