



In January 2016, Jennifer McCormick announced her candidacy, saying: "As we teach our students and I teach my son, you can't make change just by talking about it; you have to do something about it."

STABILIZING FORCE

McCormick Education Era Begins

By Rebecca Patrick

Jennifer McCormick, Ph.D., ticked all the career education boxes at Yorktown Community Schools: teacher, principal and superintendent. In January, she became the 44th Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction. Her goal is straightforward: “to help all students in the state”. McCormick talks in-depth to *BizVoice*® about the policies and partnerships that will help achieve just that.

***BizVoice:* You’re entering office following tenuous relationships Glenda Ritz had with the governor’s office, most Republican legislators and other interested parties. How are you repairing and building those relationships?**

Jennifer McCormick: We did a lot of outreach through the transition team and beyond. We’ve tried to reach out to those folks who felt either neglected for several years – some beyond the four years – or they felt they were heard but it was very on the surface ... done to check a box for some requirements. So really re-engaging those stakeholders is a very big push for us. ... It’s got to be ongoing and very purposeful.

We’re making sure that we are inviting them to the table for very important discussions such as ESSA (the federal Every Student Succeeds Act slated to replace the No Child Left Behind Act; President Trump put it on hold in late January). It’s making an effort to make sure everyone is getting a voice. That doesn’t mean we are going to agree with everybody, but we need to make sure those voices are heard and that the communication is solid to the field and outside the field so folks are aware of what’s happening in the education world in Indiana.

***BV:* Coming in, how would you characterize your relationships with educators and the business community?**

JM: I’ve had some really great experiences professionally in the education arena. I’ve got good relationships with a lot of superintendents. Do I know them all? No. But I’m going to get to know many more. I’ve had great relationships with many of the professional organizations and I’ve been a member of several of them as well. That’s an advantage; that’s where my life has been for over 20 years.

Where I’m going to have to work and focus on is with the business arena. Did I do that locally? Absolutely, but this is statewide. Through the campaign, I started some of those relationships – and will continue that so they are

aware and their voices are heard. A lot is going to happen through CTE (career and technical education) ... making sure we’re being very smart with the Department of Workforce Development, working in partnership with them.

***BV:* Expand on how you see the partnerships with the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) and CTE playing out?**

JM: There’s a great opportunity with higher education, K-12 and the business world, and making sure DWD is part of that is going to be critical. ... We need to make sure that we’re all paddling in the same direction. ... What is our best way to prepare K-12 to maximize higher education and our workforce needs that are immediate? That conversation is already happening. There may be a restructure of how we look at CCTE (career, college and technical education) courses, CTE funding and how we prepare kids before they enter high school.

Our focus right now is once kids enter high school, that it’s planned. But many times they need to plan prior to that, or they need to be exposed to things so when they hit high school they’re better informed when making course decisions. Not that anybody is going to know what they want to do for the rest of their life, usually at 14, but it’s

Personal Snapshot

- New Castle native; graduated from public school there in 1988
- Attended Ball State, Indiana State and Purdue universities
- Career in Yorktown Community Schools: special education and language arts teacher at the sixth grade level; elementary school principal; and district superintendent for seven years
- Married with one son, who is attending West Point; husband is a science teacher at Yorktown High School and longtime wrestling coach

nice to expose them to the jobs we have in Indiana, the salaries attached and the education or certification you would need.

BV: You've said before that you don't believe the state Department of Education has been responsible enough to local schools – in what ways do you find that is the case?

JM: For example, the pay-for-performance monies. The previous go-round (not this one), it took five memos from the department for them to get it right, in order for us to distribute that. We didn't hit timelines and teachers were upset at their own central offices waiting on their money. It's things like that – we need to make sure communication is clear, concise and going to the folks it needs to go to at the same time. We'll get that shored up and taken care of.

BV: The Indiana Chamber supports suitable testing for students and accountability measures for all involved in the education process. Is that something you agree with in principle? What are your feelings about the systems we currently have?

JM: The assessment is the problem. I



McCormick pledges to “work tirelessly” and believes the staff she’s put together will allow for great things. A new cabinet position, chief talent officer, “will oversee licensing and will be a big help in the arena of evaluation, professional development.”

understand accountability, I agree with accountability. One area that ESSA will allow for is a multi-faceted approach, instead of saying (for example), Yorktown you're an “A”, when I can tell you that Yorktown has got some work to do. Other districts will be a “C” and they are doing really well in some areas that maybe an “A” school would need some work in.

The communities don't see that. To put one grade on a school is probably not very reflective of what's happening. Parents can

understand a grade card. Some people don't think they can understand a multi-faceted approach grade card, but I think they could.

I like the idea to say this is where we are with graduation rates, this is where we are with student growth, with student performance, with that student support piece, how we are doing as a community, with those wrap-around services (health care/screenings; afterschool programs, etc.) – so a multi-faceted approach to accountability. I've not talked to a

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*Source: Indiana Department of Education ** Source: 21st Century Scholars 2015 State Report Card

superintendent who wants accountability to go away. They don't want it to be lax. They want it to be accurate. They want it to be transparent. They want it to be fair. And I would agree with that.

BV: How would you overhaul ISTEP – or does it need to be merely tweaked in certain areas?

JM: It's too long; we could shore that up as far as time. I don't agree with some of it, but we have to be careful because it has to be an assessment that is proving to do what it does with the amount of questions it asks. I'm worried because it provides us no national norming; ISTEP does not do that. Whatever that end result test may be, we need to know: Are kids on track for graduation and how are they being compared with our national peers? To find that, we need to be diligent. That's going to take some time. Anytime you make a shift in assessment, it requires a shift in comparability studies and different things.

BV: How deep is your support for school choice and charter school programs?

JM: I'm a parent; I understand the power of choosing where your child goes to school. I like that choice because sometimes (public school) is not a good fit. I've had students come to me (at Yorktown) and say this isn't working and I need this. I've told them that's not what we offer, but there are three schools around us that do. Transportation becomes an issue a lot of times, but I do agree with choice.

My concern with the choice – and some of the limits I would like to see – is for the voucher program to be appropriated separately, so

**VIDEO BONUS:
McCormick up
to the task**



it's not coming out of K-12 funding. It would be easier to track and more transparent. Then taxpayers would have a better handle on what's happening. Many of them during the campaign would ask me questions and there was a lot of confusion about that program – a lot of people in the dark.

Not all the state's monies are going to traditional public schools; we now have traditional charter and private schools receiving that money. So how do we better communicate that to the folks who are voting and whose money is going to those programs? Separate appropriations would be a good start.

BV: One of your biggest pledges was to push for another overhaul of the state funding system to re-examine how aid for poor children is calculated (via the complexity index in the funding formula). What brought you to that conclusion and talk about your experience as a public schools superintendent in dealing with that one bucket of money?

JM: First, Sen. (Ryan) Mishler has a huge job in front of him, with some help from Sen. (Luke) Kenley (leaders on the Senate Appropriations Committee). When the complexity index was changed (for 2015) from those qualifying for the (federal) free and reduced lunch to those directly served (through welfare or in foster care), it really impacted some districts. It's one of those unintended consequences where some of the most at-risk districts really took a hit in their overall funding. I know Sen. Mishler is aware of that and they are revisiting it.

Beyond that, the other piece of the puzzle is property taxes. The districts that are being greatly impacted by the circuit breaker issues

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McCormick, who is sworn in as her father (holding the Bible) and husband Trent look on, will primarily reside in Speedway during this session and then decide whether the family will make a move from Yorktown.

have got to be looked at as well. For Yorktown, we had plenty of money for transportation, but I didn't have any money for bus replacement. I can hire drivers, but I can't replace buses. So, when they're done, they're done; it becomes an ongoing crisis. When you don't have bus replacement money, you have to dip into the general fund, which is where you pay for staffing – so where is the support for students coming from? So it's not just the funding formula, but it's a piece of it that we can't ignore.

BV: A few days before you and Gov. Holcomb were sworn in, he announced his desire to make your position one appointed at the governor's discretion (starting in 2021). What are your feelings about that personally and from the perspective of an educator and parent?

JM: This isn't a new conversation for Indiana. Personally, it's a little odd when you come off a campaign for 11 months – and campaigns aren't fun, they're very taxing on a family – and this hits. But I wasn't blindsided; there were a lot of conversations and they were very courteous in letting me know what was going on. I understand the importance of a governor being able to work with a state superintendent, because we just lived with a governor and a state superintendent who couldn't get along.

And it was very hard for all of us in the field. It did cripple us. I understand this is being proactive (to avoid that in the future). I get the power of the governor and the state superintendent working well together. On the other side, I also respect the voice of the voters. I had a lot of people voting for me.

... It's a very difficult decision for legislators to make, and I hope they get feedback from their home (districts) in making that decision.

The voters voted me in for four years.

I'm going to do what I have to do to develop the best state Department of Education in the nation. We're going to stay focused on that.

I haven't proven myself in this position, I know there are a lot of what-ifs, a lot of questions. My motive is not to say, "Hey if that happens, I hope I get re-hired."

BV: Indiana businesses are very supportive of sensibly expanding the state's pre-K program – first beginning with more students from low-income families. What is your position on pre-K, both for this year and going forward?

JM: We're really going to get aggressive. I think that is an area that we have not maximized what the department can do with the field and other stakeholders. We're trying to entice some great people into that arena in the department. I've been in a lot of conversations where it is so hard to track who is being serviced, who is not being serviced. There is no tracking mechanism at the preschool level like there is in K-12.

People are asking for data and there is no mechanism to get the data. Our pilot (program of five counties) is so limited. It's good because we're servicing people, but for the purposes across Indiana it's so limited. I would love to see universal pre-K, but I know we simply can't afford it and can't maintain it. And that's a big problem.

I do like that the governor wants to double the pilot program for those most at risk who aren't already being served. I support that. I know he said he wants to stay within those counties that are already identified. There are areas outside those counties I hope we can eventually look at, but I know too it's a financial decision.

I'm not as concerned about the exact dollar amount. ... The legislators are going to have a better handle on what we can

afford. People at the K-12 level get nervous because we know there's one big massive amount of money and if monies start getting taken for pre-K purposes, obviously that may impact K-12 purposes.

BV: What are your top priorities for your first year in office?

JM: When people ask that, I say "yes". People laugh about that, but if you look at where we are – assessment and accountability has got to be a priority, teacher retention and attraction has got to be a priority, preschool and doing it well has got to be a priority, where we are with broadband accessibility and capacity, it's got to be a priority. And the whole piece of the puzzle to address the funding, it's got to be a priority.

BV: Where are we right now with implementing ESSA?

JM: We pushed our submission date back to September (and communicated that with the U.S. Department of Education). That does not put our federal funds at risk as long as we do our assurances up front; those will be finished early in the spring. Despite the pause at the federal level, we are continuing our work in order to stay on track for that September deadline for formal submission.

BV: Any parting thoughts for our readers?

JM: I think what the business world can expect to see is for us to have a focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), CTE, what we are doing with our higher performers, talent development and preschool. A lot of our staffing and cabinet choices will give the Chamber a snapshot into who we are and who we want to become. We will work tirelessly to become the best in the nation.