Building World-Class Schools for Iowa: A Response to the Governor's Reform Bill

On January 14, Governor Branstad released the proposed education reform bill which focused on PreK-12 education with an emphasis on college and career readiness, teacher evaluation, tiered compensation models, and teacher preparation. Governor Branstad should be applauded for making education a foundational part of his platform. Iowa citizenry must engage in courageous and critical conversations in order to make sure our learners are well educated. As we engage in these conversations with our neighbors, community members, teachers, local legislators, and others, it is important to adhere to the guidelines for courageous conversations: speak your truth, stay engaged, experience discomfort, and expect and accept non-closure.

The reform bill is divided into five distinct components 1) teacher leadership and compensation; 2) Teach Iowa initiative; 3) Iowa diploma seals; 4) educator development system; and 5) the Iowa Learning Online initiative. The sub-sections of each component are defined with my response to the impact this may have the University of Northern Iowa's teacher preparation program and the school districts we serve.

Component 1: Teacher Leadership and Compensation System

Raise Starting Salaries: Make teaching more attractive with a minimum starting salary of $35,000.

Response: The increase in the minimum pay for teachers will not only attract more people into the profession, but it would also make jobs in Iowa more marketable for out-of-state teachers. This initiative showcases that teaching is a cherished profession in which Iowans are vested.

Improve Entry into the Teaching Profession: Create a residency year for all new teachers. This residency year will include a reduced teaching load and increased learning opportunities.

Response: The residency model for new teachers is a supportive initiative. It is very similar to the current induction model in which novice teachers are paired with mentors. In some cases, the current model was under funded which made it difficult for smaller districts to provide the necessary supports for novice teachers. In the residency model, new teachers will be granted release time to work with master and lead teachers. The master and lead teachers will also be granted release time to work the new teachers as coaches and mentors. An investment in novice teacher support will enable the new teachers to perfect their craft which will offset teacher burn-out and combat attrition. The hope is that although there is an intense focus on novice teachers, there is still a distinct need for mentor, master, and lead teachers to guide and support teacher education students during field-experiences and student teaching.
**Enhance Career Opportunities:** Design a system of pathways with differentiated pay and responsibilities.

**Response:** The design of career pathways for career, mentor, masters, and lead teachers will enable effective teachers to stay in the classroom working with students while at the same time maximizing their expertise to work with other teachers in the school. Smaller districts may find it difficult to support the various delineations and still provide the necessary instruction for students; therefore, it would be imperative for districts to create mobile models in which lead teachers and master teachers serve more than one school. Our state teacher preparation institutions need as many expert teachers as possible to guide and support teacher education students. The education reform bill focuses on mentor, master, and lead teachers to provide these services. It is essential that career teachers are also given the responsibility to work with teacher education students in order to meet the field-based capacity needs of the state teacher education programs. The districts will devise plans for the matriculation of teachers to the various pathways. At the University of Northern Iowa, we believe that a criterion for being a mentor, master, or lead teacher is to be working on or have completed a master’s degree.

**Address Labor Market Issues:** Provide incentives for teachers to teach high-need schools.

**Response:** High-need schools are those that are in need of teachers in hard-to-staff subjects or schools that are in geographical locations that are hard-to-staff like some rural schools. Providing differentiated compensation for those teachers who teach in high-needs schools would incentivize employment in those schools. Having these schools partner with higher education institutions could also engender pipeline programs to remote districts. At the University of Northern Iowa, we found that if we created opportunities for field experiences or student teaching in these high-need schools, then students are more prone to take jobs in those areas.

**Component 2: Teach Iowa Initiative**

**Tuition Reimbursements:** Provide tuition reimbursements of $4,000 a year for up to $20,000 total for top students who commit to teach in Iowa schools for five years.

**Response:** The purpose of Teach Iowa Scholar Program is to attract high-performing high school and college students to enter teacher preparation programs and to enter the teaching profession in Iowa once programs are complete. The focus is specifically on those candidates who are seeking licensure in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) areas. Once programs are complete, these candidates are to teach in hard-to-staff subjects in Iowa and will receive up to $4,000 compensation a year and not to exceed $20,000 per recipient over a five-year period. Another component of this initiative is to promote the teaching profession. The basic premise for this marketing and public outreach initiative is sound. Funds invested in the promotion and marketing of teaching profession is way overdue. Young people should be encouraged to pursue teaching as a viable professional option not only because of the altruistic
nature of the profession, but also because of the comparative market opportunity to other professional areas. With the increase in starting salaries and tuition reimbursement options teaching in STEM fields, this could become a reality in Iowa. Although, I like the marketing campaign, I think this award would be better situated as an incentive scholarship for students to enter the profession. The marketing campaign coupled with forgiveness loans will encourage those in need of college funds to enter the profession. If the students, once they completed their teaching degree, do not teach in Iowa then they default on the loan and must pay funds back to the state. By making the award a grant for tuition as opposed to a bonus after graduating, the award would be similar to the federal Teach Grant in which the University of Northern Iowa has offered more than any other institution in the nation.

**Student Teaching Pilots:** Strengthen clinical experience with a full year of student teaching in the senior year of college, rather than the typical one semester.

**Response:** One private and one public institution will be selected to pilot this year-long student teaching. The pilot should take place in an area in which the student teachers will be exposed to a diverse pupil population. While student teaching, the students will participate in onsite pedagogy or methods courses. This model is crafted based on the Arizona State University (ASU) model. The ASU model was created in order to provide assurances that student teachers have vested connections with districts so that they can be hired to teach and enticed to stay in the Arizona area. Arizona has a severe teacher shortage and a horrendous attrition rate. Arizona imports more teachers from other states' teacher preparation programs than those who are prepared in the state by Arizona teacher education programs. Although this may be a good program for Arizona, Iowa does not have the same concerns. As I reviewed the ASU program, which is only focused on elementary education, I have not found any empirical evidence of the program’s effectiveness. There are ample anecdotal testimony about this model from student teachers who praised the connections they made with students, schools, and districts in which they served. There are also stories of student teachers remaining in the districts they student taught in as first year teachers due to familiarity and connectivity. If we were to be the university chosen to pilot the year-long student teaching model, it would be best if this was done in a hard-to-staff district so that our students could gain the familiarity and begin their teaching in this district similar to the effects touted by ASU students. If funds were to be made available for a pilot, then the University of Northern Iowa should be engaged in this endeavor due to our premier aspirations and our current distributed student teaching model.

**Jobs Board:** Create a statewide education job posting system.

**Response:** The creation of a jobs board will make it easier for teachers to apply for job openings across the state using one portal. This will also give hard-to-staff schools access to all qualified applicants.
Component 3: Iowa Promise Diploma Seals

Diploma Seals: Use diploma seals to identify and recognize graduating high school seniors who have demonstrated through certain competencies that they are college- and career-ready.

Response: The purpose of the diploma seals is to indicate readiness for college and the job market. The seal being based on completion of competencies indicate that the typical unit approach to high school content mastery will no longer occur. There is a concern that this diploma seals initiative is a post-graduation form of tracking. Those who do not earn a seal, but graduate would be judged as having a lack of competence or worse yet incompetent.

Component 4: Educator Development System

Create a System of Accountability: Update teacher and administrative standards and evaluation to provide more valuable feedback and to enable the state to secure a waiver from components of the federal No Child Left Behind law.

Response: The reform bill recommends the continuation of the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL). The initiative will tighten the formative and summative tools to include a 360-degree feedback component tied to ISSL and district, building, and individual professional goals. There will also be a research and development component that will be focused on the increase in student learning. The principal is empowered to remove incompetent teachers, but this should also be the task of the superintendents and school boards as well. Creating a report card system based on student performance in order to get a waiver on No Child Left Behind means that federal edicts are guiding local autonomy. Holding teachers accountable and connecting compensation incentives to performance is encouraging. Reporting publically teacher performance can cause school-based morale issues and unrest which could be detrimental to the climate and culture. Climate and culture disconnects have been proven to adversely affect teacher performance. A solution would be to create the system, use the assessment for merit purposes for teachers and as an impetus for instructional retooling, and to keep the information at the administrator-to-teacher and administrator-to-district level, but not as a public report card.

Component 5: Expanding the Iowa Learning Online Program

Iowa Learning Online Program (ILO): The ILO provides online instruction with Iowa licensed teachers in various academic subjects.

Response: The ILO is specifically designed for various subjects in districts that have hard-to-staff situations. The purpose of the program is to fill the academic gap for some learners who have exhausted courses in their schools and are still seeking academic opportunities. The ILO is a suitable replacement for situations such as this when school-base courses or post-secondary options are not available. The caution about ILO is when parents opt for this virtual learning for their children in lieu of the socialization and visceral learning of a traditional school.
If parents choose ILO as an alternative offering, then they should pay participation fees. But if students are taking ILO courses to fulfill academic offerings their schools do not provide, then participation fees should be waived.

As I reflected on the reform bill, I thought about an article I recently read entitled “Building a Common Core for Learning to Teach and Connecting Professional Learning to Practice” written by Deborah Loewenberg Ball and Francesca Forzani from the University of Michigan. They stated that our education system is under performing. The system under performs in what it produces and for whom because it is a system that has never delivered high-quality education for all students. They further conjectured that it is not a system at all because schools vary significantly from one neighborhood to the next, there are more curricula than schools, and tests do not assess what students have been taught. The authors truly capture the concerns that are pervasive here in Iowa. The Governor’s World-Class Schools for Iowa Reform Bill is what Jim Collin, in his book Good to Great, would call a bhag - a big, hairy, audacious goal - and with any goal, the individual, actionable initiatives are the cobblestones on the pathway to success. As components of the bill meanders their way from inception through funnels, into law, then on to rule-making, and finally implementation, all stakeholders should be vigilant along the way and remember that are most aspirational bhag is to serve the needs of all of Iowa’s learners.