Governor's education primer
Daniels discloses 'The Bell Curve' author altered his views on schools

When the Indiana Education Roundtable met last month, Gov. Mitch Daniels had recommended reading for its members. He gave each a copy of Charles Murray's "Real Education."

"Provocative," the governor told the Roundtable at the meeting's end, and the author's views have "changed the way I think about education."

A few of Murray's primary assertions:

- "There's not much that even the best schools can do to raise the reading and math achievement of low-ability children."

- "One of the most damaging messages of educational romanticism has been that everyone should go to college."

- "The proposition is not that America's future should depend on an elite that is educated to run the country, but that whether we like it or not, America's future does depend on an elite that runs the country."

If it sounds familiar, it's because Murray's message is in the vein of "The Bell Curve," the 1994 book he co-authored with Richard J. Herrnstein - a book linking genetics and IQ, widely denounced as racist and methodologically unsound.

The author's name on a book distributed by the governor alone was enough to bother Roundtable member Wendy Robinson, superintendent of Fort Wayne Community Schools, but she became even more disturbed when she began reading.

"I was shocked," she said. "The book goes against everything I believe as an educator."

"It's really very troubling," said Robert Hefflenbein, an assistant professor of teacher education at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. "The idea that (Murray) is now back and in the public conversation and (his message is) being distributed by our governor - clearly, Daniels is trying to make some sort of impact on education before he goes on the national stage."

Hefflenbein, who attended the Roundtable meeting to hear the discussion on the state's proposal to water down teacher licensing requirements, said the message of "Real Education" was counter to everything he teaches his TUPUI education students.
"My message is, 'All children can learn,' " he said. "The flip side of that is the heavy responsibility that comes with that. (Murray's view) is a cut-out - we're going to service the academically gifted. The fact is, you can't teach the same way for every student. You have to spend a lot of time discovering what works with each one."

Kevin Carey, policy director for the Washington-based Education Sector, said the governor's interest in the book was "disturbing."

"Essentially, this book makes the case that too many kids go to college," he said. "Indiana policymakers and the Indiana Education Roundtable have worked very hard to increase the number of college-bound high school graduates. It's been a broad goal shared by Republicans and Democrats alike, and the state has been notably successful in getting the number of college-going students to increase. The thesis of this book directly contradicts everything everyone in Indiana has been doing."

Carey, who formerly worked on education finance and policy issues for the Indiana Senate and as an adviser to then-Gov. Frank O'Bannon, said Murray's latest book has garnered little attention outside of "far-right conservative circles." In a review he wrote last year for InsideHigherEd.com, he gives examples of Murray's unsupported assertions and describes the book as "catnip for his likely audience: people with an unhealthy appetite for the politically incorrect and a strong need for so-called simple truths."

"It's wrong to say that too many students are going to college," Carey writes in the review. "Too few are going, particularly those from disadvantaged communities. The history of American education is one long series of decisions to open up the halls of academia to students who, at the time, were looked down upon as undeserving. The naysayers have been disproven, over and over again."

Jane Jankowski, spokeswoman for the governor's office, said the governor distributed the book to Roundtable members because "he tries to give them lots of things to read. He wants to encourage them to think with an open mind."

Jankowski said the governor was particularly interested in spurring discussion of post-secondary education and whether Indiana needs to "strike a more balanced system" in which more students pursue two-year programs. "There are lots of careers and vocations in which we can earn a very good salary," she said.

Or, as Murray writes in "Real Education": "Finding a first-rate lawyer or physician is easy. Finding first-rate skilled labor is hard."

Unless one embraces Murray's elitist views of children ordained to excel academically on the basis of IQ tests administered to 6-year-olds, who chooses whether a student becomes a first-rate lawyer or a first-rate skilled laborer? To even entertain Murray's ideas, vigorous debate and counter views must be allowed.

Therein lies the problem with Daniels' approach. Frank O'Bannon established the Education Roundtable to bring disparate voices together to reach common goals. Educators, parents, business owners and others shared their views and crafted recommendations that resulted in real improvements in Indiana schools, including the impressive increase in college participation that Carey referenced.

But the current governor is packing the panel with people who think like he does. He brings in experts who espouse ideas to support his aims. If Daniels wanted a substantive discussion of "Real Education," he wouldn't have dropped it before members and advised that it changed the way he thinks about education. At the least, he would have invited speakers sharing pro and con views on the book.

More important, a leader truly interested in substantive and respectful debate wouldn't drop a book written by an author whose previous work was roundly criticized for racist views before African-American educators and suggest it's worth considering without explaining exactly what ideas deserve attention.

Rep. Greg Porter, an Indianapolis Democrat who is chairman of the House Education Committee and a Roundtable member, said he wasn't surprised that the governor found the book intriguing.

"I'm quite sure he believed in a lot of it," Porter said. "I glanced at it and then put it in the back of my truck. I look at it now to remind me that I have to stay the course to take care of all children, to be more of a strong advocate in saving as many children as I can."

Porter said he rejects the idea that Indiana's education system should be multi-tiered, with students sorted and tracked based on perceived abilities. In his own case, Porter said, such a system would have written him off when he struggled in third grade. Instead, he graduated from Indianapolis' Shortridge High School and went on to graduate from Earlham College.

Porter needs the help of plenty more advocates to support Indiana students - those who will speak up not just for the academically elite but for all children.
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