TERRY NELSON: Indiana, we have a problem

TERRY NELSON • OCTOBER 13, 2009

Someone needs to speak out for Indiana’s school children, whose educational needs have been ignored in the heated debate over the new teacher-licensing proposal, REPA (Rule Revisions for Educator Preparation & Accountability) being pushed by Gov. Mitch Daniels and new state school superintendent Tony Bennett.

In what appears to be a continued “hidden” agenda to eventually put aside public schools for charter schools headed by business individuals not experienced in education, many politicians can see the long term financial benefit and management control over what has been a frustrating transitional time for education and educators.

It is true that our Hoosier children are in need of an improved educational model that endeavors to reach out to a more diverse student body and provide the skills needed to survive in a way unparalleled in our nation’s history. The “accountability” model being pushed by the state’s leaders, however, does nothing to improve education in the classroom, and everything to create a business model that seeks control and financial gains.

By reducing the amount of time college students are required to spend studying teaching methods, human development and instructional strategies, and increasing the number of hours in subject area courses, Daniels and Bennett are thumbing their noses at the state’s teaching colleges that are touted as among the best in the nation.

As a 33-year educator, trained at an Indiana university, I never can recall a situation where parents complained about a teacher not knowing enough literature or enough algebra. Instead, the problems, if any, stemmed from teachers being unable to reach the troubled students, or frustrated trying to connect with all of the multiple intelligences, during a time when both special needs and gifted students fill the seats of a single classroom in a single hour — all of whom are tested by a single test that supposedly reflects their knowledge and the worth of their school.

When students fall through the cracks, it can be attributed to numerous causes, all of which should be addressed, but I don’t believe the success of a pupil was ever attributed to a teacher needing three more content area classes.

Terry Nelson is a 33-year teacher at Muncie Central and Yorktown high schools, Journalism Education Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award recipient, former school board president, Yorktown Schools and Dow Jones National Journalism Teacher of the Year.

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In a second controversial area, the state's governor and school superintendent propose to streamline the teacher licensing process by eliminating Early Childhood and Middle School teacher licenses. Anyone who is a parent of a child who falls in those two areas, knows that these times of life are unique and would not necessarily be well served by a generalist, as will be required under the REPA provisions of only two teacher licenses: Primary – sixth grade; and fifth grade through 12th.

One wonders if Mr. Daniels and Mr. Bennett would get their wisdom teeth pulled by a dental hygienist, or their appendix removed by a certified nursing assistant.

Teacher "specialists" in subject areas and in children of a specific age who learn and socialize uniquely can better serve their students under the current licensing process. The only reason to reduce four specialty-teaching areas into two would have to be for management ease in hiring and placing teachers. Yet a successful physics teacher who trained to teach high school seniors, could conceivably also teach your fifth grade sons and daughters, and vice versa under the REPA proposal.

In a third area of revision, the rules for the certification of school principals and superintendents would be changed to allow for non-traditional administrators from other fields, not education, who have not had the required professional preparation of the past. On one hand, it would certainly address the problems many school boards have had in hiring and retaining quality administrators, but on the second hand, it is inconceivable that an educational leader would have no experience and training in education.

Perhaps the leadership job description should be revised to attract more quality individuals into the higher paid ranks of administrators, or Indiana's system of school board and superintendent led school systems be reviewed and reinvented. But common sense would dictate that the best educational leaders to make decisions about students and their teachers should be skilled and practiced in education.

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A fourth proposal area is concerned with teacher certification renewal. Under current guidelines, teacher certification renewal is provided by local university and on-line teacher courses, and by attending educational conferences and seminars. So now to add to the burdensome task of an over-taxed building principal, who is already hard to recruit and keep, would be the responsibility of providing in-service opportunities within the school (but not during school hours) for teachers, and deciding upon and granting certification renewal licenses for teachers they deem fit in their school.

This power and responsibility of renewing a teacher certificate would be at the discretion of a building principal, who may or may not have had any courses or experience in the teaching profession under REPA provisions.

Kind of like Dora the Explorer grading a law student's bar exam.

It seems obvious that none of these changes proposed by Gov. Mitch Daniels and state superintendent Tony Bennett have anything to do with the quality or improvement of student and teacher education, and everything to do with management and financial control.

Education has never been an institution that could be run like a Walmart or a Safelite May or a Warner Gear, where the numbers tell the story, and individuals are laid off or fired; products are pulled or promoted, depending upon the discretion and politics of the CEO.

And it shouldn't be.

Students are a more precious commodity than Sam's Club water, student loan collections or even forging a crankshaft. And any education reform -- and believe me, there are plenty needed -- should reflect concern for each student, and not on whether Indiana should follow Gov. Jeb Bush's model of schooling in Florida, or for the ease of firing and placing school personnel.

Historically, Indiana was settled by individuals who valued education and freedom, and who built schools to ensure that the next generations would have the opportunities not readily available to our pioneer forefathers. The current educational model of the public schools micromanaged by politicians, ever-changing laws and well-meaning but ineffectual reforms is desperately in need of a shake up.