

Iowa Education Leader #14 * August 13, 2003

A policy and advocacy update from the Iowa Department of Education * Ted Stilwill, Director

This is the time when the educational community in your school district marks the start of a new year. This annual sense of a "new beginning" provides a time when the staff and community naturally look to the leadership to provide some communication and guidance.

I know that there is a great deal of operational information that you share, and that you also try to communicate and reinforce the sense of direction for your particular education community. If you would like to include in that message some contextual affirmation that your staff is part of a powerful statewide educational community, then perhaps you will find some of this message to be useful.

I am a person who has "grown up" professionally in the Iowa education system, so it has been particularly interesting for me the last few years to gain more of a national perspective on education in Iowa. Invariably when Iowans are involved in any activities at a national level we are viewed as a modest group of people, often reluctant to loudly champion our own accomplishments. In fact, it has been common for me to encounter individuals from other states who assume that we must be very comfortable with our level of student performance, when I don't ever recall anyone from Iowa suggesting that our performance levels are quite what we would like. I think it is part of our work ethic to be modest, and part of our commitment to all students that creates the desire for continuous improvement. In spite of all that, here are some facts about education in Iowa that you can use to establish a context that we are part of a strong and improving educational community.

We recently announced results from the ITBS and ITED testing, and this week will release our NCLB report card, showing that Iowa's statewide student performance increased in 6 of the 8 areas reported.

- 4th grade Reading increased for the third consecutive year with the percentage of student proficient increasing to 70.4 % from 69%. These increases follow eight years of decline. To make this happen there have been state efforts to bring class sizes to more reasonable level in K-3, but also to provide access to more powerful teaching strategies and better analysis of assessment information. But performance would not have increased without building and district level commitment to make a difference on behalf of their students.
- Math scores improved at all three of the grade levels reported. 75.0% of 4th graders are proficient, compared to 72.4% previously. This is the third year of increase, which followed a nine-year gradual decline. 73.6% of 8th graders are proficient, a slight improvement over last year's score of 73.1%. 82.5% of 11th graders are proficient, compared to 81.3%. This is the second year of increase following four years of decline.
- Statewide graduation rates have increased steadily each year and are at nearly 90% for the 2001-02 school year.
- Iowa's average daily attendance for grades K-8 have been fairly consistent over the years. The average daily attendance for the 2001-02 school year was 95.8%
- We have work to do at 8th and 11th grade in Reading, where scores are essentially flat. We will need to examine the rigor of our expectations, the support we have provided to access better teaching strategies and the additional interventions that we may need to make available. We have provided more concentrated support in the lower grades and we need to adapt some of what we have learned to middle school and high school. Data shows that while 4th graders increased, with 70.4% proficient compared to 69% previously, 69.3% of 8th graders are proficient, essentially unchanged from last year's

69.4%. 77.0% of 11th graders are proficient, also essentially unchanged from last year's 77.1%.

As you start a new year and look forward to the new faces that enter your schools, allow me to extend a thanks for all of your efforts to open school smoothly to begin a safe and productive year. Thanks too for the hope that you provide for teachers and staff who want to make a difference. While there are students we have yet to reach, you provide the expectation and support that will help each one to succeed. You will face all sorts of other challenges launched from economic, political or meteorological realms. But leadership in Iowa schools has a good track record for making improvements happen, even in difficult times. Thanks for all you do.