

Iowa Education Leader

A policy and advocacy update from the Iowa Department of Education * Ted Stilwill, Director * February 11, 2004

These can be pretty discouraging times, so it's nice to be able to forward a ray of hope when one shines through.

I would guess that many of you are not so enamored with the workings of state government that you find the time to watch Iowa Press on IPTV. The program for the past several weekends offered an interesting diversion from the line of caucus candidates who have now moved on, only to be replaced by reporters and legislators who offered little hope about increased funding or positive directions for our state in general. This last weekend, however, Governor Tom Vilsack took his place at the Iowa Press table and provided some encouraging words about our future. (You can read the transcript at this website: <http://www.iptv.org/iowapress/transcripts/3123.cfm>.)

I know that you all are fully aware of who appointed me to my current employment and at whose pleasure I serve. But, at the obvious risk of being self-serving, I would like to take a moment of your time to forward a part of his message with my own color commentary. His message provided a little strength to my resolve and it may for you as well.

I have never heard the Governor be as firm or as clear about the importance of education to Iowa and to Iowans. He told of encounters with business leaders interested in Iowa who unfailingly asked about the quality of education in our state rather than the regulatory or tax climate. He described the difficulties in districts reducing programs and higher education increasing tuition. He explained the critical role of quality teaching and told the story of a young teacher burdened with \$30,000 in college loans painfully considering whether he could afford to stay in teaching.

The Governor described his recommendation for K-12 funding in FY06, since the Legislature is required to set that amount this year (two years in advance). His recommendation is that Iowa make a commitment of \$137 million additional state aid for K-12 funding for FY06 -- an amount equivalent to 6% allowable growth. But he wisely split the that amount, providing two-thirds to traditional "allowable growth" and one-third, or \$44 million, to add to the Teacher Quality and Student Achievement funding.

While it is particularly difficult to provide a basic funding recommendation that meets all needs, I believe this one goes a long way in doing just that. The two-thirds allocated to foundation aid is the best investment for the long term; it does not currently benefit all districts, but funds committed to foundation aid "grow" in future years. This funding is traditionally less vulnerable than categorical funding such as the now departed technology or Phase III funding.

The \$44 million devoted to Teacher Quality would reach all districts on a per student/per teacher basis. The funds could be targeted toward instructional salaries and professional development. We know we are losing ground on salaries and we know that professional development is our strongest strategy and best investment toward improving instruction and student achievement.

It would be great if such funding increases could take place sooner, in FY05, and perhaps that train has not yet left the station. But in the meantime, we have one elected official willing to champion the cause and try to get a commitment for the future that might move us in a positive direction.

We still have a long way to go to ensure ongoing, quality education in Iowa. We must continue to help community members see that the quality of education and other government services is only continuing to erode. We must continue to speak up and out, because the inevitable is clear if we fail to take action.