

Iowa Education Leader

A policy and advocacy update from the Iowa Department of Education * Ted Stilwill, Director * May 7, 2004

Feedback on Proposed NCLB Changes

I gained some helpful feedback from the proposed NCLB changes I sent to superintendents last Friday (see attachment). I also appreciated hearing from administrators and teachers at the building level. Perhaps the most frequent comments I heard confirmed that a) schools recognize that accountability is important, b) educators may resort to focusing more on testing than on continuous improvement, and c) the law, through faulty accountability expectations and formulas, will cause the public to lose confidence in public schools. Another person pointed out, "the irony is that the (SINA) designation will draw needed resources away from the schools that most need them," which is another example of what we consider to be the fundamental flaws of NCLB.

More feedback on the proposed changes would be helpful, as I will be discussing these in letters and in person with our Congressional delegation. Meeting with policymakers and attempting to affect legislation has become a far more significant part of my job -- and yours as well, I'm sure -- than I ever would have anticipated, which has led to some conversation about the role of politics in education.

Politics and Education

When I began my work as a Department Director about ten years ago, a person I respect who had experience working with our legislature gave me some excellent advice: "Often partisan politics will be about making someone look good or making someone else look bad. Your job is to make things work."

But "making things work" can be very difficult amidst the partisan rhetoric in the United States, which seems to have grown more strident over the past decade. I'm not suggesting that partisan politics is inherently negative or that government is always to be shielded from criticism. Organized and respectful differences are a healthy way to ensure integrity, to represent diverse interests, to avoid dynasties, and to encourage ongoing revitalization of governmental thinking.

What I am suggesting is that it would be helpful if we approached our differences with better balance, or maybe just better manners. Those of us in government, whether we are in schools, colleges or state agencies, must always remember first and foremost that -- despite relentless campaign rhetoric to the contrary -- it's not about us, and it's not about somebody winning elections. Rather, it's about creating and implementing solutions so that what's best for students prevails. Once hired, selected, elected or appointed, we are government, and we are entrusted to make things work.

Despite the increasing partisan rancor, I am both positive and optimistic about politics, democracy and education. "Politics" is the way constituent needs come to the surface, and it provides the mechanism for change in national policy, in state policy, in local schools, and in all kinds of organizations both private and public. It may be that the learning process for human organizations such as legislative bodies, state agencies or local schools resembles that of children: We need to absorb new information and endure some confusion before we emerge with a new level of understanding. (Does that sound like how we have adopted national education policy over the last ten years?)

One reason for my optimism about the political influence on education is the oft-repeated phrase that "all politics is local." It has been my experience that local constituents make

the right decisions when they are provided with the right information. As educational leaders, we can help “make things work” by becoming the source of that good information regarding the needs of children and youth. Increasingly, our youngest citizens are the ones who need our most effective advocacy. If we can articulate and support their needs, not ours, success is inherent, because we must have confidence in citizens’ ability and desire to discern the right direction. Much of the rhetoric that may pass for political discourse underestimates the ability of voters to make informed decisions. We can help children and young people best by being clear and compelling in our advocacy for their needs. In doing so in today’s economy we are advocating for our nation’s future as well. This leadership role has never been more critical.

These times call for a special extension of leadership and advocacy responsibility. Today we must not only lead with the best information available, but we must also be prepared, practiced and disciplined in our ability to counter misinformation as well. We hear that negative campaigning works, but it is increasingly popular to attack government services such as education for political advantage as well. In the last year, for example the DE has been accused of hoarding \$39 million dollars in NCLB funds, preventing tens of millions in special education dollars from going to schools, “dumbing down” the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and being too supportive/too critical of NCLB. I know better than to take such claims personally, but I also know they can and will damage the credibility of our collective work in education.

Particularly during the next summer and next year, we all will need to be very clear in our ability to respond to this type of misinformation, and be willing to accept this as part of our advocacy role. In the coming weeks, I will be sharing with you as clear as information as possible on the real financial position of education in Iowa. I will also be sending similar information on where we stand in terms of student performance and accountability. Hopefully this information will be useful to you and others in the education community to counter some of the misperceptions or misinformation that faces us. While this may not be a traditional role for school leaders, I believe it is what our students need us to do today. As Harry Truman said, “There are risks and costs to a program of action, but they are far less than the long range risks of comfortable inaction.”