



Fill in the Blank: “World-Class _____”

By Deborah D. Thornton

The phrase “world-class” is overused and meaningless in today’s society. It is used for everything from cars to yo-yos, and especially for education. One of the problems with the phrase is how “world-class” is defined. Whether or not something is “world-class” changes on a daily basis. As soon as the standard is set, it changes. Remember the first cell phones? World-class! That was only 20 years ago and today we consider them paperweights.

However, Governor Branstad and Lt. Governor Reynolds are to be commended for trying. On July 25-26 they’re holding the promised Iowa Education Summit, designed to focus on the stagnate nature of K-12 educational achievements in Iowa. The theme is “World-Class Education, World-Class Workforce.” In announcing the summit, Lt. Gov. Reynolds said, “By bringing together leaders from both the private and public sector, in addition to world-renowned educational leaders, we hope to provide open dialogue to encourage and implement real change in Iowa classrooms.”¹

The summit will be held at the HyVee Hall in Des Moines, and is limited to only 1,650 participants. The cost is \$65.00. If you have any interest in affecting educational reform at the state level, you should make the time to attend. You can register at <http://iowaeducation.iowa.gov/education-summit>.

Governor Branstad’s proposed preschool tuition credit program for low- and moderate-income families who want to send their children to preschool passed the Republican-controlled Iowa House of Representatives, but was ignored by the Democrat-controlled Senate. The debate about whether or not to offer universal preschool to all children degenerated, unfortunately, into name-calling on both sides of the aisle.²

The Legislators opposed to school choice should spend time talking with Michelle Bernard, Chairman of the Bernard Center for Women, Politics and Public Policy, who said, “School choice is a civil rights issue. It is the natural extension of *Brown v. Board of Education*, of what Thurgood Marshall and Dr. Martin Luther King talked about – access to great schools for families.”³

Several other Governors were successful this year in implementing school reform and broadening school choice. In particular, Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels (R) signed legislation creating the nation’s largest school voucher program, the “School Scholarship Act.”⁴ This program has the widest eligibility standards of any currently in place for low- and middle-income families. It doubles the previous cap on the scholarship tax-credit program, and provides a tax deduction for out-of-pocket educational expenses for home or private schooling.⁵

According to a recent review of 19 empirical studies by the Foundation for Educational Choice, “research consistently finds school voucher programs have improved the academic achievement of both the students who transferred to private schools and those who remained in public schools.”⁶ The achievement gaps for low-income and minority students in Iowa are real. The Iowa Legislature should revisit expanded open enrollment, or vouchers, for all children, not

just preschool. All children in Iowa deserve the opportunity to attend the school best for them, whether public or private, not limited by their parents' income.

In Oklahoma, Governor Mary Fallin (R) also signed significant reform legislation. She signed legislation prohibiting social promotion of students after the third grade. Governor Fallin said, "Sending an illiterate child on to higher grade levels is setting that child up for failure." She also signed a bill requiring the use of letter grades, A-F, to evaluate individual schools.⁷ Individual schools within a district will now earn grades based on student test scores (33%), gains in reading and math scores (17%), gains by students in the lowest 25th percentile (17%), and whole-school improvement (33%).⁸

The most significant aspect of both pieces of legislation is that they were required in the first place. Why are we passing children into the next grade if they can not demonstrate skill mastery in their current grade? Why has the educational-industrial complex avoided being evaluated on their work product? We can not expect "World-Class" anything in Iowa, Indiana, or Oklahoma if there is no standard for review and no requirement of accomplishment.

The amount of money spent on public K-12 education in Iowa in 2006, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, was over \$4.2 billion (\$4,231,932,000). This is an increase of a billion dollars, or a third, since 2000 (\$3,264,336,000 in current dollars).⁹ The number of students educated fell by 11,700 to only 482,584.¹⁰ On an annual per student basis, this was an increase of \$2,000 per student, from \$6,604 to \$8,769. Student achievement did not climb to "World-Class" status during that time. If you are concerned about whether or not it will, attend the Iowa Education Summit on July 25-26.

(Endnotes)

¹ James Q. Lynch, "Capitol Digest: Iowa Education Summit website launched," *Mason City Globe Gazette*, Des Moines Bureau, May 3, 2011, <http://www.globegazette.com/news/local/article_ad8e676c-75de-11e0-a7b1-001cc4c03286.html> accessed on May 5, 2011.

² Jennifer Jacobs, "Iowa senator compares preschool to Nazi indoctrination," *DesMoinesRegister.com*, February 14, 2011, <<http://blogs.desmoinesregister.com/dmr/index.php/2011/02/14/iowa-senator-compares-preschool-to-nazi-indoctrination/>> accessed on May 5, 2011.

³ Edwin Fuelner, "Still Not Making the Grade," *The Heritage Foundation*, January 25, 2011, <<http://www.heritage.org/research/commentary/2011/01/still-not-making-the-grade>> accessed on May 5, 2011.

⁴ "Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels Signs Historic Voucher Bill into Law," *The Foundation for Educational Choice*, May 5, 2011, <<http://www.edchoice.org/Newsroom/News/Indiana-Gov--Mitch-Daniels-Signs-Historic-Voucher-Bill-into-Law.aspx>> accessed on May 5, 2011.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Greg Forster, "A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Vouchers," March 23, 2011, <<http://www.edchoice.org/Research/Reports/A-Win-Win-Solution--The-Empirical-Evidence-on-School-Vouchers.aspx>> accessed on May 5, 2011.

⁷ "Governor Fallin Signs Key Education Reform Measures into Law," *Office of Governor Mary Fallin*, May 4, 2011, <<http://okgop.com/fallin-signs-education-reform-measures/>> accessed on May 5, 2011.

⁸ State Representative Lisa J. Billy, "Education Reform Now Law," *Pauls Valley Daily Democrat*, May 6, 2011, <<http://paulsvalleydailydemocrat.com/statenews/x340277881/Education-Reforms-Now-Law>> accessed on May 6, 2011.

⁹ "Table 117, Current expenditures for public elementary and secondary education, by state or jurisdiction: Selected years, 1969-70 through 2006-07," *National Center for Education Statistics*, <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_177.asp> accessed on May 6, 2011.

¹⁰ "2006-07 Certified Enrollment Summary by District" and "2000-2001 Certified Enrollment Summary by District," *Iowa Department of Education*, <http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1348&Itemid=2410> accessed on May 6, 2011.

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