



FROM THE DESK OF REPRESENTATIVE DE BOEF

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Reading Is Fundamental for A Successful Future

Since before Iowa even was a state, the citizens of this land have made education Iowa's top priority. Once again this year, discussion about improving our children's education will be the centerpiece of the Legislature's work.

These efforts kicked off in earnest last week when the introduction of the Governor's plan was introduced to the House Education Committee. It contains significant changes in the way Iowa educates its students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The legislation contains proposals to improve reading proficiency in early grades, increase the frequency of teacher evaluations, have all high school juniors take the ACT exam, as well as toughening the eligibility standards for people wanting to be teachers.

Meanwhile, President Obama was crossing the nation telling of changes he would bring to the nation's education system. In Michigan, he declared "We also know that when students aren't allowed to walk away from their education, more of them walk the stage to get their diploma." What the president was talking about would be an effort to help fight drop-out rates by encouraging states to adopt compulsory attendance laws that keep kids in school until age 18. Iowa currently requires kids to stay in school until age 16 (along with about 26 other states). The remaining states require students to stay in school through age 17 or 18. This debate has been introduced in Iowa in past years.

Is forcing a student to stay in the classroom that much of a benefit? It's a controversial topic. If a student, at age 17, doesn't want to be in the classroom, what's to stop them from becoming disruptive to other students? Rather than trying to fix the problem by forcing a student who doesn't want to learn attend school, why shouldn't we look at why the student is in this position in the first place?

I strongly believe that these students feel left out of the learning process, become discouraged, and finally give up. Their chances of success in life have been suddenly put at risk. Their wages will be lower than others; pressure will be put on the family structure, often resulting in broken homes, crime, the use of drugs and prison.

How big of a problem is this? According to the Iowa Department of Education, in 2009/2010 school year, Iowa had 5,149 students drop out of school. That is why I strongly support the Governor's emphasis to improve reading proficiency in the early grades.

The Annie E Casey Foundation recently did a study that said "Literacy in the third grade (yes the third grade) may affect the chances that student will graduate from high school. Based on an analysis of reading scores and graduation rates of 3,975 students over ten years, students who could not read by the end of the third grade were four times more likely to drop out of high school. In fact, 88 percent of students who failed to earn a high school diploma were struggling readers in the third grade".

"The societal impacts and costs of low graduation rates are profound. We have found a strong association between dropping out of high school and lower life-time income, higher use of public assistance, and higher incarceration rates. Estimates on the total lifetime costs to society for each new cohort of dropouts accumulate into hundreds of billions of dollars."

Florida has been on the right track the last ten years in going after the reading "problem." Their actions have been aggressive, and they have the data to support their efforts. Florida lagged far behind Iowa in reading a decade ago, but today it has flipped. In 2011, Florida fourth graders'

average reading score was 225 on the national assessment of educational progress. Iowa's score was 221. Florida has moved its fourth grade reading scores from being in the lower third of the states, to join Iowa in the top ten.

Florida's actions to promote literacy are simple; Florida requires students to demonstrate their ability to read before entering the fourth grade. Florida educators now retain students who cannot read, and provide intensive instruction until they can read well enough to be successful in the fourth grade and beyond.

Why test at the third grade level? Third grade is the year that students transition from "learning to read" to reading to learn. Learning to read does not get easier with age. As a result, illiterate third graders moved on to be illiterate fourth and then fifth, sixth and seventh graders. Imagine a fifth grader reading on a first grade level sitting in a science class. These students will not grasp the scientific concepts described in their text book because they cannot read, literally. Grade level material keeps increasing year after year, but these students cannot keep up because they cannot read. They become increasingly frustrated, and eventually give up.

Florida school districts responded to the literacy initiative by organizing themselves around the hugely critical goal of insuring effective reading instruction. School focused greater amounts of time and effort on reading and encouraged parental involvement. Schools intensified their reading program in grades K-3 and teachers intervened in earlier grades and provided remedial instruction to those students who were falling behind. Parents were given strategies to use at home to support reading instruction in school.

Florida's results have been impressive. Illiteracy rates have been cut in half. Those students who are retained perform the following year at a level that is almost five and one-half months ahead of their average fellow students' reading level. School dropout rates are rapidly decreasing. Florida thinks they are on the right track and other states have joined them. Arizona, Indiana, Oklahoma and Utah have passed laws to emulate the Florida plan and other elements of Florida's comprehensive approach to reform. I know many educators, including some of my school Superintendents, are opposed to retaining third graders, but I have always opposed social promotion, so I believe we owe this effort to our children. I have heard the argument that we should not experiment on our children. In reality, all of education is a form of experimentation. I believe just having this policy will make all parties collaborate to keep third graders from being retained.

Governor Branstad is asking for our state to join them. Of the \$25 million in the Governor's educational initiative, \$10 million would be invested in the third grade literacy program.

Being able to read is so important!! It is one of the defining skills that determine a student's future and their ability to accomplish his or her dreams. If we are to give our young people the opportunity to compete and succeed in the world economy of the 21st century, being able to read is essential.

Visitors at the capitol this week: Lynn Zoulek, Sigourney Chief of Police, Allan Glandon, and students from Pekin, Sigourney, and Tri-County respectively, with KC STAAR annual Day on the Hill. Craig Johnston of Grinnell, with the Society of Land Surveyors. Brent Heeren, Tama County Prosecutor.

I am always happy to deal with any requests you may have or any input you may offer! Please contact me at 515-281-3221 or betty.deboef@legis.state.ia.us.