



FROM THE DESK OF REPRESENTATIVE DE BOEF

February 9, 2012

School Accountability System

One of the biggest issues the 2012 session is Governor Branstad's education reform bill. There are a number of proposals in this sweeping plan that are controversial.

One of the recommendations in the reform bill is an accountability system for schools. The purpose of the system, as defined in the bill, is to "hold schools accountable for student achievement." But what would this accountability system look like?

First mentioned in the blue-print released in October, the new accountability system envisioned by the governor includes multiple pieces of data, first and foremost of which is student achievement. Following student achievement, other things considered, as written in the bill are student growth, student achievement gaps, college and career readiness, student well-being, parent satisfaction, school staff working conditions, school fiscal responsibility, and graduation and attendance rates. All of these elements are assessed to determine what level of accountability a school has achieved.

But how would that accountability be communicated to the local community and the state? The bill gives no direction on what label to apply to a school based on their performance in these areas. That designation is left up to the State Board of Education when it establishes the system.

It's possible to consider a system like what Florida and six other states have adopted recently: grading schools on an A to F scale.

The question can be asked, "can a parent tell how their local school is doing?" Are they making "Adequate Yearly Progress" as defined by the No Child Left Behind law? What does that even mean, if they are? What about ambiguous ratings such as a scale that goes from "Exceptional" to "Persistently Low-Achieving"? Is that clear enough? Families deserve truth in advertising when it comes to school performance, so how can that be clearly communicated? Everyone understands an A to F scale.

Florida's plan met with a lot of controversy when it was adopted. But perhaps the results can speak for themselves. When the plan was implemented in 1999 there were 677 schools that ranked as a D or an F and 515 that ranked as an A or B. 10 years later (and academic standards were raised three times during this period, making it more difficult to obtain a higher grade) there were 217 D and F schools and 2,317 A and B schools. When truth in advertising was applied, parents paid attention, communities paid attention and schools took action. It was no longer ambiguous how the local school was doing. Finally obtaining an A or B became a source of pride for communities, something that parents and school personnel rallied behind together.

Florida then applied this newfound knowledge to help schools in need of assistance and reward schools that were succeeding. Additional resources and funding were funneled to schools that stayed on the low end of the scale. Schools that performed well, or moved up letter grades were rewarded with increased autonomy from state interference and given monetary rewards to be used at the schools' discretion that could include uses such as bonuses for teachers. Parents and students were given the choice to leave a school that remained at the bottom of the scale.

There is clearly more to it than just slapping a label on a school and moving on. Florida's dramatic changes were the result of many reforms. Additionally, the system has to be designed to be fair and clear in its ratings. Are the pieces of data the governor's plan calls for fair assessments of that school's accountability? That question will be discussed as the bill moves forward.

However, there should be little controversy about providing parents with factual information in a format they can use and understand. The reform bill is already calling for an accountability system to be designed and implemented. Is an A to F scale good for Iowa? It should at least be considered as part of the discussion.

2012 Century and Heritage Farm Program

On Wednesday, February 1, 2012, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) issued a press release in which Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey encouraged eligible farm owners to apply for the 2012 Century and Heritage Farm Program. The program is sponsored by IDALS and the Iowa Farm Bureau and recognizes families that have owned their farm for 100 years in the case of Century Farms and 150 years for Heritage Farms.

Applications are available on the Department's website at www.iowaagriculture.gov by clicking on the Century Farm or Heritage Farm link under "Hot Topics." Applications may also be requested from Becky Lorenz, Coordinator of the Century and Heritage Farm Program via phone at 515-281-3645, email at Becky.Lorenz@iowaagriculture.gov or by writing to Century or Heritage Farms Program, Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, Henry A. Wallace Building, 502 E. 9th St., Des Moines, IA 50319.

Farm families seeking to qualify for the Century or Heritage Farms Program must submit an application to the Department no later than June 1, 2012. The ceremony to recognize the 2012 Century and Heritage Farms will be held at the Iowa State Fair and is scheduled for Tuesday, August 14th. The Century Farm program began in 1976 as part of the Nation's Bicentennial Celebration and over 17,000 farms from across the state have received this recognition. The Heritage Farm program was started in 2006, on the 30th anniversary of the Century Farm program, and more than 500 farms have been recognized. Last year 341 Century Farms and 56 Heritage Farms were recognized.

Visitors at the capitol this week: Lindsay Greiner with the Iowa Soybean Association, from Keota, Melissa Gentry P. A. from Ollie, and Debbie Hinnah from Harper with the Annual Rural Health and Primary Care Advisory Committee.

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.