

Dr. Bennett: Hi, I'm State Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Tony Bennett. Indiana made tremendous strides in 2011. Hoosiers from all walks of life – educators, parents, students and community members – came together to put Indiana's students first.

As our state successfully pursued the nation's most comprehensive education reform agenda, so many champions stepped up to the plate on behalf of Hoosier children. I've asked one of the legislative session's biggest heroes, House Education Committee Chairman Bob Behning, to join us today as we recap our "Putting Students First Agenda." Bob, you were our legislative quarterback, and Hoosier students will forever be grateful for your efforts. Thanks for joining us today.

Rep. Behning: Thanks for the invitation Tony. I'm happy to be here to discuss the reform initiatives we passed in 2011. Our agenda was wide-reaching, because we knew that after years of tinkering around the edges, we had to comprehensively address the challenges facing our system. Nothing but the best is acceptable for our students, and it was time to ensure all Hoosier children receive the top-notch educational opportunities they deserve. Years from now, people will remember 2011 as the year Indiana rejected the status quo and embraced change that will benefit students for generations to come.

Dr. Bennett: I've done a lot of travelling over the last few years. In fact, I've put over 100,000 miles on my car driving from Indianapolis to all corners of this state. I've visited with thousands of teachers and students in busy classrooms and packed gymnasiums. I've sat at the dinner table with parents at PTA sponsored pot lucks. And I've even run into Representative Behning at quite a few of these events. As I listened to so many good folks share their ideas and experiences, it became clear that Hoosiers had some very practical advice for Indiana's policy makers.

Indiana's educators wanted to be recognized and rewarded for driving student success.

Indiana's school leaders wanted the flexibility to meet the needs of their students.

And Indiana's families wanted the freedom to pursue the best educational opportunities for their children.

Rep. Behning: My colleagues and I in the General Assembly heard the same message loud and clear. Without a doubt, we knew it was time to act. Our students, educators and parents were tired of waiting. We passed a comprehensive reform package that education leaders around the nation now seek to replicate. Let's take a look at the details of these reforms, starting with our call for annual evaluations for every teacher and principal.

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Rep. Behning: Research tells us teacher quality is the number one classroom factor impacting student success. So many amazing Hoosier educators give so much of themselves to provide their students a great education. Thanks to Senate Enrolled Act 1, their hard-work and talent will finally be recognized. Indiana is at the forefront of a national movement that demands we treat our teachers like the talented and hard-working professionals they are.

Senate Enrolled Act 1 requires all school corporations to develop annual evaluation systems that use multiple measures, including student performance data, to identify our best teachers. These locally developed evaluations will also be used to provide all teachers useful feedback and targeted professional development.

The new legislation also expands the list of performance indicators school corporations can use to give educators pay raises. Student performance data, student needs, and teacher leadership qualities have been added to a list that previously only included years of performance and degrees held.

The Indiana Department of Education just announced an exciting new program to help school corporations implement new evaluation systems that drive increased student performance. Six school corporations will take part in the 2011-2012 Indiana Teacher Effectiveness pilot, developing evaluation tools that will provide a helpful blueprint for school corporations across the state.

Speaking of local innovation, Dr. Bennett will talk about the flexibility new legislation provides our local school leaders.

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Senate Enrolled Act 575 gives local school leaders the freedom to run local schools. The importance of this legislative victory cannot be overstated. Indiana has a diverse student population with diverse needs. Local communities know what's best for their kids. Thankfully, they now have the freedom to pursue innovative policies and programs tailored to meet the needs of their students.

Senate Enrolled Act 575 focuses contract negotiations between teachers unions and school corporations to salary and wage related benefits. Teachers will provide input on important classroom issues through a clearly outlined discussion process. Thus, teacher's voices are heard, while school leaders are free from the bureaucratic red-tape that so often gets in their way.

Gone are contract provisions that require principals to break seniority ties based on the role of a die or flip of a coin rather than quality of instruction. Gone are clauses that limit the number of meetings a principal may have with his staff or the length of time a teacher may spend with students. These provisions handcuffed local leaders, and they failed to drive student success. As a former teacher, principal and superintendent, I'm glad they no longer exist. Indiana is now a national haven for locally driven education innovation. I can't wait to see what our school leaders and teachers can accomplish working together to drive student success.

Of course, nothing is more related to student success than ensuring every Hoosier student has the opportunity to attend a great school. Thankfully, Representative Behning led the effort to provide all students access to a great education. Representative Behning, the floor is yours.

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Representative Behning: Every child, regardless of his ZIP code or how much money is in the family bank account, deserves access to a quality education. Two bills we passed this year work to provide all Hoosier students the opportunity to succeed.

House Enrolled Act 1002 increases the number of entities that may authorize charter schools. The legislation establishes the Indiana Charter School Board, a group of bi-partisan appointees who will authorize quality charter schools throughout the state. The bill also adds non-profit private colleges and universities to the ranks of charter school sponsors.

The charter school model provides increased freedom for school leaders, educators and parents to work together to drive student growth in these public schools. Thousands of Hoosier children sit on charter school waiting lists. Thanks to "Putting Students First," they will soon have access to a school that meets their unique learning needs.

House Enrolled Act 1003 provides Hoosier families access to means-tested scholarships that can be used to attend quality private schools. This isn't about choosing one type of school over another, but rather admitting that children have different needs and will thrive in different learning environments. These reforms give Hoosier families a voice and they give Hoosier students a choice.

Most important, both pieces of legislation include strict accountability measures that ensure students are attending quality schools. All charter schools and participating private schools will take the ISTEP test and receive A-F letter grades just like traditional public schools. The State Board of Education will take swift action against schools failing to drive student success.

SWITCH TO JOINT SHOT OF DR. BENNETT AND REP. BEHNING.

Dr. Bennett: Prominent national figures have called education the civil rights of our generation, but as our state and nation continue a decades-long quest to achieve equal educational opportunities for all students, it's clear education is the civil rights issue of every generation. Indiana's "Putting Students First" education reforms ensure the Hoosier state is leading the charge on behalf of all students to provide an education that is best in the United States and on par with our global competitors.

Representative Behning: We hope you enjoyed today's podcast. The 2011 legislative session was a monumental step in this state's education history. Our future leaders will reach new heights on the heels of locally driven education reform that propels innovation and drives excellence.

Dr. Bennett: Moving forward, implementation is our top priority. The Indiana Department of Education will succeed in supporting school corporations as they take advantage of the opportunities "Putting Students First" provides. We know we have a lot of work to do, and I promise we're more than ready to meet this challenge. The nation is watching, and Indiana is ready to hit a home run for our kids. Thanks for listening and have a great day.