

A Call for Empowerment: Liberating Indiana Schools for Success

Expanding school vouchers in Indiana was recently reported as being a chief priority for conservative Hoosiers in the next legislative session. As organizations representing the base voting bloc for Indiana's Republican super majority, and who have been at the forefront of Indiana's education reform debates over the past two years, we seek to set the record straight and outline exactly what our education priorities are.

In Sum, We Support:

Eliminating our voucher program's suffocating regulations, which severely compromise private school autonomy, before considering any expansion of this form of private school choice;

Allowing public, charter and accredited and/or voucher-accepting private schools to choose from a variety of non-Common Core aligned, internationally benchmarked standards and nationally norm-referenced/criterion-referenced tests rather than forcing them to measure all curriculum, students, and teachers with one set of criteria;

Liberating public, private, and charter schools from the Common Core-aligned system that controls them;

An investigation into the regulatory compliance costs of following federal mandates embedded within No Child Left Behind and its accompanying waivers from the Obama administration;

Investing in families with young children, rather than in government-approved institutions, so as to expand, not constrict, parents' choices when it comes to the care of children of the pre-Kindergarten age;

Securing the right of parents and legal adults to control their own education data;

Giving businesses the regulatory and economic freedom to train their own employees rather than maintaining higher tax rates to subsidize politically favored worker training programs;

Eliminating state preferences for specific products of the College Board and encouraging development of alternative advanced placement assessments used in A-F accountability determinations.

Adjusting current law to better "equalize" basic per-pupil funding for school districts;

Platform for Empowering Districts, Schools, and Parents:

Conservative Hoosiers do not support expanding our current school voucher program, which is already the largest in the nation, without simultaneously eliminating the onerous regulations that plague it. According to the Center for Education Reform, Indiana is ranked as the second-worst state in the country at “infringing on private school autonomy” due to our voucher program’s many suffocating and unnecessary regulations. Because of these regulations, Indiana’s voucher program has one of the lowest private-school participation rates in the nation, at one-third of Indiana private schools. State lawmakers should cut all but the most basic of transparency requirements on private voucher schools, given that parents and private accreditation agencies already place higher demands on private schools than any bureaucrat can generate. Particularly egregious is the requirement that voucher-accepting schools administer the new assessment aligned to Indiana’s rebranded/Common Core-aligned standards. Even states such as Florida, a leader in national reform efforts, grant voucher-accepting schools freedom in the selection of standardized assessments, since tests direct curriculum. If true school choice is to be realized, this issue must be addressed so that parents may have genuine and competing curriculum options.

We call for legislation to allow for “freedom in testing” to satisfy state accountability measures. Public, charter and accredited and/or voucher-accepting private schools should have the choice of any nationally norm-referenced assessment to satisfy state accountability measures (such as the Iowa Basics, Northwest Evaluation Association products, etc.)

We advocate for liberating public, accredited and/or voucher-accepting private, and charter schools from the Common Core-aligned/ “rebranded” system that controls them. In lieu of Indiana’s current rebranded/Common Core-aligned K-12 math and English standards and assessments, we support empowering local districts to adopt standards that are internationally benchmarked, free of pedagogy, and equal or superior to Indiana’s pre-Common Core standards, which were ranked as one of the top three sets in the nation.

Indiana legislators and other leaders must truly reclaim state sovereignty in education by forgoing string-laden federal programs, such as the No Child Left Behind waiver. We call for an investigation into the costs of compliance which USDOE demands in exchange for receiving some of our citizens’ tax dollars back.

We support policies that empower families with pre-Kindergarten aged children to choose from a wide variety of educational and child-rearing options, not simply state-run daycare/preschool. There already exists a healthy private market, which is currently meeting the demands of parents. Expanding tax credits and other incentives to ease access to these existing options, as well as parental or grandparental care, is the conservative, family centered approach Hoosiers seek, not funneling tax dollars into a new entitlement program which limits economically disadvantaged families to solely government daycare/preschool programs. Moreover, while state-run programs in other states have proven to be increasingly expensive, the data shows they produce no lasting academic or social benefit to participants. Adding a new entitlement is not conservative; would crowd out the private market of diverse, affordable, and often faith-based providers; creates a preference against the family-based and non-institutional childcare arrangements many parents prefer; and ignores the root causes of home deprivation.

We call on the Indiana legislature to secure data ownership to parents and students 18 years old and above, and to require their specific consent in each instance that anyone requests to share their information. Currently, Indiana's state longitudinal data system, the Indiana Network of Knowledge, and digital learning platforms schools use do not adequately protect students' sensitive, personally identifiable information. Due to relaxed federal Family Education Rights and Privacy Act regulations, both INK and IDOE personnel have the authority to share or grant access to students' personally identifiable data without permission from the individuals who own or manage that data on each child's behalf.

Trusting K-12 and workforce data collection systems to help plan the state economy has no historical record of effectiveness, and diminishes individuals dearly held principle of self-determination. The state simply should not pick career winners and losers by subsidizing workforce training programs of favored institutions. Instead, Indiana should work to reduce the regulations and taxes that reduce profit margins for businesses so they once again have the money to train their own employees. They should also follow Massachusetts' model for career and technical education, in which high school students apprentice without jettisoning the core liberal arts classes that prepare a young person for responsible citizenship.

The legislature should also withdraw any state financial support and incentives for schools to administer the rewritten, anti-American Advanced Placement U.S. History course and its accompanying test in future school years, unless substantive changes are made. State tax dollars should not be spent to subsidize the costs of curriculum and related assessments for a course which denies American exceptionalism and doesn't reflect the attitudes and beliefs of Hoosiers. Because the state's A-F accountability structure requires schools to administer specific curriculum and related assessment products, such as the College Board's AP courses, to receive points towards their overall College and Career Readiness index, schools are incentivized to place students into these objectionable courses. We call for revisions to Indiana's A-F accountability structure to remove the monopoly of the College Board, and we urge policies that embrace local options in curriculum and testing.

The current school funding formula has resulted in a race to the bottom for funding in many of our suburban and rural school districts. In 2008, state law allowed no property tax revenues to support local schools General Fund, but also took income taxes and elevated sales taxes to 7 percent into the state funding formula for 'redistribution'. By 2009, many of those districts had lost at least 20 percent of their General Fund distribution to other districts, pushing them to place additional operating referendums on the ballot. The net result to citizens in these communities was double taxation. Lawmakers should adjust current law to better "equalize" basic per-pupil funding for all Hoosiers. While some argue poor children require more money to educate, no objective studies indicate how much more poor children need. In fact, research indicates that increased education spending does not increase student achievement. If dollars spent per child is the key to success, how does one explain one district receiving \$8,100 per student and failing while another district receives \$4,800 per child and succeeds? Let's better equalize this disparity in the upcoming session, then start a conversation about the most efficient ways to fund students across the state and the most important factors that lead to academic and life success.