

Leadership Southern Indiana Breakfast Series
Student Open Discussion Notes
For
Dr. Tony Bennett

Following the presentation by Dr. Tony Bennett, Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction, Interfaith Community Council, Inc.'s Youth Development Program sponsored 22 high school students in meeting with area Youth Development Leaders to share comments and thoughts about the presentation and gathered their suggestions for improving education in Indiana.

The students were from both public and private high schools that serve Floyd County, Indiana including Christian Academy of Southern Indiana, Floyd Central High School, New Albany High School, Our Lady of Providence Junior-Senior High, and Rock Creek. Unfortunately, due to a last minute urgent situation, Community Montessori was not able to attend. Students who participated were: Catherine Aubrey, Shawn Austin, Ollie Ballew, Loretta Cambron, Chris Carruthers, Danielle Castleman, Kierston Cooper, Kelsy Dement, Mekenna Dement, Jon Ferguson, David Gatz, Elexis Hayes, Ross Heinz, Emory Jones, Casey Marlin, Patrick McCrum, Irina Miralda, Ben Orem, Joseph Pearson, Amanda Powers, Kenika Quarles, Nathaniel Wilkinson

Adults facilitating the discussion were Barb Bridgwater, Youth Champion of Youth Count and Luke McConnell, assistant director of Interfaith Community Council. Don Unruh, Principal of New Albany High School was also present and voiced support at gathering the students for this kind of discussion.

The floor was opened for the students to comment on which of Dr. Bennett's ideas they either supported or rejected.

Closing the meeting were Dr. Tony Bennett, Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction and Christine Harbeson, executive director of Interfaith.

Following are the subject areas discussed and the recommendations of those present.

Higher Standards for Teacher Performance - Supported

Students began by discussing their thoughts on Dr. Bennett's comments regarding teacher performance and accountability. Much of the discussion centered on the students' views that teachers who are tenured seem to not be as effective as newer teachers. One student even used the term "slacking off" referring to an older, more experienced teacher. Another student commented on a situation where a teacher was laid off only because they were newer despite the fact they were a far more effective teacher than the person who maintained their employment. Many of the students agreed with the idea that teachers need to be held more accountable and face stricter consequences for not being effective despite how long they have been teaching.

The one point they did not fully agree with Dr. Bennett on was the significance he placed on content knowledge vs. pedagogy. They commented that teachers not only need to know the material they

are teaching, but they also need to be able to connect with the students. An example was given of a math teacher who was not effective despite having a high level of content knowledge. It was stated that this teacher had difficulty conveying content to the students and was often not patient with the students when they did not understand.

Following the above comments and discussion, a question was asked: How do students make a difference when it comes to teacher accountability?

All of students agreed that student evaluations of teachers could be an effective tool when assessing teacher performance. Concerns were mentioned regarding the fact that some students may not like a teacher despite their ability to teach the material and would give a poor evaluation. It was also mentioned that some students may not realize how effective a teacher was until they have moved on to college or a career, so it was suggested to also include an alumni evaluation of their previous teachers.

All Day Kindergarten & More Time in School – Supported

The majority of the students were in agreement that spending more time in the classroom would benefit them. They suggested that all day kindergarten and year round schooling would provide the opportunity to gain more time.

The students stated that too much time is wasted at the beginning of the school year reviewing what was learned from the previous year. If school continued throughout the summer, students would continue the practice of learning and be more prepared and sharper minded when coming to school. This would allow the teachers to cover more material and prepare the students for the standardized tests they have to take. They also mentioned that by going to school year round, they may have more opportunities to take college entrance exams and eventually score higher and be more competitive when applying for college.

They did refer to other year round programs they know of where students attend classes for a certain number of weeks and then get a week off. The students stated that this would provide enough breaks, but would allow for a consistent learning routine. The students also suggested implementing this strategy with the lower grade levels first and following them through to high school rather than instituting it across the board at first.

Multiple Pathways – Supported

The student comments were centered on the idea that if students were able to specialize more in school then more students may stay engaged leading to higher graduation rates. One student commented that he takes many classes only because he has too, not because it is of a high level of interest to him. He stated that he would be more prepared for a specialty area in college if he could concentrate on a narrower field of study in high school. A couple of students commented that specialization should not occur until high school to give students enough of an opportunity to make an informed decision about their academic path.

One student also mentioned that freshman students are often very disconnected from the rest of the student body and activities of the school. She suggested implementing programs that will orient freshmen students better in order to get them more involved earlier in their high school career. She

believes this may lead to higher graduation rates as well. If students are engaged in their education earlier, they will be more likely to stay engaged throughout high school and graduate.

When graduation rates were mentioned, it was asked whether or not Dr. Bennett's 90-25-90 goal was realistic or obtainable. Many students responded affirmatively, but one student questioned whether or not the goals should be higher. He stated that the goal should be to graduate 100% of students. He stated the higher your goal is, the higher your achievement will be. For example: 90% goal may get an 80% success rate, but a 100% goal may get above a 90% success rate.

Competition – Mixed Support

Some concern arose over the fact that too much competition between the students could lead to problems. One student stated that students should be encouraged to do their best for themselves but not at the expense of others. He thought the comments during the presentation may encourage an environment that could allow the competition to get "ugly".

However other students agreed that they do not want their college placements going to other students and that bringing healthy competition back could lead to higher standards and student involvement.

One student mentioned a program that her school is implementing that has brought competition to the school. The school is divided among teams with students from all different grades on teams. The students are asked to perform community service projects and are evaluated on the success of the projects as well as school performance among other criteria. As they work on various special projects, the leadership structure of the team rotates to give multiple students the opportunity to play different roles. She stated the students really enjoy this competitive atmosphere and get more involved.

Dr. Bennett's Request for Suggestions to Improve Education

Dr. Bennett is in favor of freedom for superintendents to administer textbook dollars according to the needs of their student body; which may include \$299 laptops. He suggested considering a different philosophy on how state education dollars are spent. He also responded to a student's suggestion for smaller class sizes in affirmation, and/or the ability for principals to conduct administrative changes according to the particular needs of the school they represent.

Christine Harbeson's Suggestions to Improve Education

It seems apparent, based on the conversations with the students, that we would recommend to Dr. Bennett that a Southern Indiana Youth Department of Education Advisory Council be formed, as well as developing them in other regions of the State to ensure statewide input into education in Indiana. We encourage statewide support for incorporating the 40 Developmental Assets into education. These assets provide positive modeling to students giving them tools to protect themselves from risk behaviors while simultaneously building thriving behaviors. I encourage focusing on our state's entire education system, especially including the students, in addition to just focusing on teachers and administrators. Knowing what drives student interest will help teachers be more effective and may actually make their jobs easier.