

We're all reformers in education, now

By CRAIG LADWIG • August 24, 2010

"If you spend any time rubbing shoulders with Indiana's ruling class, you'll recognize the circular logic: 'The solutions to our problems are not politically achievable, and in any case they are beyond local control.'"

The ink on the above introduction to the fall issue of The Indiana Policy Review was not dry when Gov. Mitch Daniels provided a working example of its application:

"It's not like we can get 50 percent (of my education agenda), or 40 percent, or 10. It's zero," he told an Indy Star columnist last week. "We've got to be able to at least get the bills to the floor."

Later, expressing enthusiasm for a battle he carefully avoided, Daniels offered: "We're raring to go."

So, the "news" is that the sorry state of Indiana k-12 education (and the 53 percent of the state budget it is expected to consume to the point of deficit in 2011) is not the governor's fault -- and it cannot be used against him in any presidential campaign.

All politically deft, to be sure, especially considering many believe the House will go Republican this November, clearing the way for the governor to count coup on an educational issue or two.

Wouldn't it have been helpful, though, at least for those of us left behind in Indiana, if the presumed presidential candidate had spent more of his eight-year assignment here describing in detail what education reform looked like, how it would work better for long-suffering school patrons and taxpayers?

The reforms that Daniels proposed -- he mentioned letting high-school students graduate early if, hold your breath, they have the necessary credits -- were pegged to what the teacher unions might accept. None of his public ideas (he may have commendable private ones) promised significant change in the Indiana education establishment.

Indeed, the one reform about which Daniels was most animated, for which he dedicated the weight of his office, was full-day kindergarten -- an idea as innovative as 1816 and that old fool of a socialist Robert Owen.

If the governor needed specific suggestions, four years ago the Indiana Policy Review Foundation placed on his desk a detailed, nationally tested and comprehensive reform plan for Indiana, the "Weighted Student Formula," returning classroom decisions to teachers and principals.

Or this week, as the governor ponders another \$200 million from Washington to prop up union teacher salaries, he could be mentioning the stack of research showing that federal mandates and even state regulations are costing us more than they are worth, that per-student costs will soon exceed \$8,000 compared with half that for private schools.

Or he could be citing a landmark study by the Cato Institute that it would be relatively less expensive and more effective to give each Indianapolis Public School student a voucher to attend any school they chose.

Look, let us grant that politics is the art of the possible rather than the ideal. Indiana Democrats, however, when they were a scraggly bunch of malcontents in a historic minority, somehow found it possible to convince a popular Republican governor and an all-powerful GOP House leadership

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to pass the state Collective Bargaining Law (CBL) of 1973.

The governor, as scrappy a politician as there is, could be making clear the CBL was the measure that established lock-step, assembly-line rules to the sensitive task of educating young minds. It is the measure that created the pension-hungry political machine that now eats our state alive.

Wouldn't Daniels be just as well positioned for a presidential nomination had he used his bully pulpit to make any of these points, to have prepared Hoosiers for a necessary and systemic change in their education system? Or could it be that the cynics are right, that education was a non-starter not because the GOP didn't have the votes in the House, but because nobody could figure out how to take the credit?

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