Written by Lynn Campbell
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Governor Terry Branstad on October 3 unveiled a 10-year plan to transform Iowa's education system that would end promoting third-graders who read poorly, change the pay system for teachers, and require students to pass end-of-course exams to graduate.

"Instead of spending all of our time fighting over the issues of the past, we really want to focus on the things that will ... systemically reform and improve Iowa's education system," said Branstad, who added that earlier debates over ending state-funded preschool and zero-percent allowable growth in school funding will not be revisited.

"This is a plan for the next decade," said Iowa Department of Education Director Jason Glass, who noted that the plan is intended to be a comprehensive package and should not be viewed as a list of options to be cherry-picked. "This plan ... should be the blueprint for where our resources now and in the future go into education."

But Democrats were skeptical, especially because Branstad and Glass declined to set a price tag for the proposal and don't plan to do so until shortly before the legislature reconvenes in January.

"We could propose anything that looks great, not have a budget on it, and then when we look at the money, go, 'Oh my God,' and then blame the legislature for not passing his bill," said state Representative Bruce Hunter (D-Des Moines).

Iowa State Education Association President Chris Bern said any education agenda needs to put students at the center of reform, taking into account everyday life experiences in the classrooms.

"While the governor's blueprint remodel has a lot of ideas, it is still short on details," said Bern, whose union represents more than 34,000 educators. "We still await a clear vision of how to move these ideas forward, how to fund them, and what the real application of these plans would be."

Requiring Reading for Promotion

The “education blueprint” follows a Florida model of not allowing third-graders to move to the fourth grade unless they can read.

“Being able to read after third grade is a critical juncture where children transition from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn,’” the report states.

But state Representative Sharon Steckman (D-Mason City), a retired educator who will be the ranking member on the Iowa House Education Committee next year, said the idea is punitive.

“I have always felt as an educator that you get much more out of children, out of employees, out of anyone with positive feedback to those kids,” Steckman said. “I think holding a stick over their head is really not” the way to go.

Linda Fandel, the governor’s special assistant for education, said she was skeptical of the plan until she saw that fourth-grade reading scores in Florida are now higher than in Iowa.

“What the [Florida] program did was to use a very strong stick of third-grade retention to get everyone’s attention, from educators to parents, on the importance of making sure kids read before they get out of third grade,” she said.

Fandel said 13 percent of Florida third-graders were retained when the program started in 2002, and that decreased to 5.9 percent by 2009.

Performance-Based Teacher Pay

Branstad’s plan would also move the state from seniority-based teacher pay to a

performance-based system.

Under the plan:

• Teachers would move through a four-tier teacher-compensation system with apprentice, career, mentor, and master levels.

• The state would increase beginning teacher pay, which is a minimum of about $28,000, but the amount of the increase was not specified. Iowa teacher salaries range from roughly $30,000 to $75,000, and the idea of the new plan is that teachers wouldn't have to wait as long to reach the higher pay levels.

• Teachers could get paid more if they taught in shortage areas, worked at high-poverty schools, took on larger class sizes, earned National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification, or earned performance-based awards designed locally.

• All new teachers would participate in the performance-based system, which would be optional for current teachers.

Burlington schools Superintendent Jane Evans told IowaPolitics.com that it "would be huge" if the state could help increase teacher salaries to make the state more competitive. She said teacher salaries in Burlington range from $30,126 to $66,428.

"We're competing with people in all the states around us, Missouri and Illinois and Minnesota," she said. "We need the help from the state of Iowa."

As for performance-based teacher pay, Evans called it "inevitable."

A decade ago, Iowa was on a path to become the first state to implement performance-based teacher pay. But Democrats didn't embrace the plan once they took control of the legislature and governor's office. Glass on Monday assured that there is no "cash for test scores" component of the proposed new plan.

Passing Exams to Graduate

The new education plan also would require high-school students to pass end-of-course exams in core subjects such as English, algebra, biology, and U.S. history or government to graduate. Students could receive remedial help and retake the exams multiple times.

"The difference between end-of-course exams and an exit exam is this is a suite of exams," Glass said. "With several end-of-course exams through a student's career, you can get deeper into content than if you just had a student take a two-hour exam once during their high-school career. The purpose of this is to try and more tightly align instruction at the high-school level with what the standards are."

The plan also calls for all 11th-graders to take either the ACT or SAT college-entrance exam, with the state picking up the tab. This past year, the 22,968 Iowa students who took the ACT represented 61 percent of last spring's graduating seniors, a slight increase from the previous year. Iowa has one of the lowest participation rates in the SAT, with 3 percent of public-school students taking the test.

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