

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Meaningful education reform is always fraught with political peril. By definition, it challenges the status quo. There are also disparate vested interests – from teacher unions to parents to school administrators, districts, and boards. Depending on the approach, reform can be onerous on schools, teachers, or taxpayers (or all three). And, of course, children and their futures are at stake, and by extension so is the long-term health of the state itself.

So education reform is inherently difficult. *Consensus* education-reform is even more challenging, but that hasn't stopped the administration of Iowa Governor Terry Branstad from trying. Even with Democrats controlling the state Senate, the Republican governor is trying to get his 26-element education-reform package through the legislature this year.

The final proposal was unveiled January 6, and the draft legislation followed on January 11. It has three thrusts: “great teachers and leaders,” “high expectations and fair measures,” and “innovation.” In broad terms, the proposal aims to: improve the quality of classroom teachers (increasing selectivity, allowing nontraditional pathways into the teaching profession, and giving school districts more flexibility in personnel decisions); evaluate student progress more consistently and add new requirements – such as third-grade reading proficiency and end-of-course exams for high-school students; and remove barriers to new educational approaches. (See [sidebar](#) .)

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Jason E. Glass, the director of the Iowa Department of Education, told the *River Cities' Reader* last week that some education-reform efforts add too many requirements without the funding to meet them. Others increase funding without accountability. "With this proposal, we're trying to get to the right balance of pressures and supports," he said.

The proposal has a first-year price tag of \$25 million, \$17 million of which would be new money coming from the state's general fund. (The remainder would be redirected existing education funding.) That's a minor increase compared to the Fiscal Year 2012 K-12 state funding level of almost \$2.8 billion (according to the Iowa Policy Project), but Glass said education funding would likely increase in the coming years – although that's not discussed in Branstad's final proposal. "My expectation would be that this \$25 million ... would be a starting point, and I would expect to see us build on that expenditure over the next several years," he said.

{mp3}ed-reform-glass{/mp3} ***Interview with Iowa Department of Education Director Jason E. Glass (34 minutes)***

He conceded that several elements of Branstad's plan could result in increased costs at the local level that might not be fully offset by the proposal's increased state funding for school districts. He cited three components: the kindergarten-through-third-grade literacy program (funded at \$10 million in Branstad's proposal), the shift to annual teacher and administrator evaluations (from the current every-three-years model), and the optional School Administration Management program (which frees up principals to focus on instruction rather than building management).

But he also said several elements of the plan could reduce costs to districts, such as the state paying for all 11th-graders to take college-entrance exams.

Glass said that any reform effort should be judged in a decade on a number of factors: whether Iowa's educational system is again held in global high regard, whether Iowa students are getting into top colleges and top jobs, and whether the state's educational system brings jobs and businesses to the state. On a quantitative level, he said, Iowa ninth-graders should score as well on the Programme for International Student Assessment test as students in the nation's and the world's top school systems – Massachusetts, Canada, Singapore, South Korea, Finland. That test is one component of the governor's proposal.

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The ultimate goal is to reverse a 20-year trend. As a document prepared for last year's Iowa Education Summit [noted](#), on the National Assessment of Education Progress tests for reading (in fourth grade) and math (in eighth grade), "Iowa has moved from being a national leader to the national average, partly due to declining results but largely because of gains made in other states. ... Iowa has remained stagnant while much of the nation is moving ahead." The state was in the bottom three in the country on the change in its test scores in both areas from 2003 to 2009.

### Poison Pills and Radioactivity

A "blueprint" for Branstad's plan was released in October and [emphasized](#) that it was "not a list of options to be cherry-picked based on special interests, ideology, political affiliation, or whether one is within or outside of the education profession. ... Lasting and meaningful change requires this sort of commitment and transformation."

That suggests an all-or-nothing rigidity, and Glass called the governor's plan "bold and sweeping." Yet he also stressed that Branstad was open to compromise and alternative strategies to accomplish his education-reform goals.

"We are committed to the values that are behind every part of this ... ," he said. "We are going to be very rigid and stand behind the values that are behind this, but we are open and flexible on the specific strategies and how we get there. ... It needs to go through this democratic legislative process. ... If we can get the majority of these elements through, I think that would be a short-term success."

Glass said the plan was crafted to be palatable to Democrats and Republicans. "Our proposal is an attempt to get at a bipartisan consensus on a number of contentious issues," he said. "We tried to pitch a proposal that would be received with optimism and that wouldn't contain any poison pills for either ... chamber or either party. It's an attempt to put together a proposal that we can stand behind for the long term for both chambers and regardless of what administration is in charge. ... This is not about trying to get a short-term political victory."

He added that he's encouraged so far by the leadership in both chambers and both parties. "I'm very optimistic that we'll get an education-reform bill passed in Iowa this session," he said. "I

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think the governor has worked very hard to try to keep the door open to both chambers and both parties ... . They also are trying very hard not to make this discussion radioactive to the other side.”

The Branstad administration has certainly been inclusive in its process. “We have been at the table in several meetings,” said Chris Bern, president of the Iowa State Education Association (ISEA). “We’re relatively happy with the amount of input we’ve had into this. ... I believe the governor and his staff and the Department of Education and the staff there have been listening.”

Yet after the release of the governor’s final plan (but prior to the legislation being made public), Bern sounded lukewarm: “Overall, we like that the governor is making education a priority in the state. But there’s still a lot of missing detail in what they’ve put out, and until we see the detail, it’s hard to take a position on things.”

Bern’s reaction was echoed by others. “I think that we share a lot of the same goals,” said Senator Herman Quirnbach, chair of the Senate Education Committee and a Democrat from Ames. “I think that we have some common ground in some of the proposals that have been made.” As for Glass’ promise of trying to build a two-party consensus, Quirnbach sounded warily optimistic. “I’m going to give him the benefit of a doubt until I have reason to doubt. ... I want to keep the focus on this on the kids. ... I’m hopeful that we’ll do something serious this year.”

[ed-reform-quirnbach](#) ***Interview with Iowa Senate Education Committee Chair Herman Quirnbach (17 minutes)***

Quirnbach said his goal is to get education reform through the Senate Education Committee by the February 24 “funnel” deadline. Adjournment of the legislature is scheduled for April 17.

There were several changes to the governor’s proposal between the October blueprint and the January version. Teacher compensation was punted to a proposed legislative task force – both because the governor’s proposal was unpopular and because it was potentially expensive.

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"We felt that the state system wasn't ready to engage in that conversation," Glass said. "Very skeptical reactions and low level of understanding around what we were trying to accomplish with it. We have work to do to help people understand what our approach was. ... This is not an idea that's taken hold in Iowa yet. So we have to work to do to build understanding ... ."

Funding was also a factor. "We want to take that issue on at the top of a new budget cycle," Glass said. "Right now we're halfway through a two-year budget cycle in Iowa, so most of the resources have already been allocated for next [fiscal] year. When you talk about educator compensation, that's the largest expenditure in education, so we want to engage in that discussion at a time when we have all the chips on the table in terms of the resources that are available."

He added that Iowa's relatively strong economy and state-budget situation present an opportunity to "direct ... additional resources into education" in the coming years. The state has low unemployment compared to many states, it's likely to run a budget surplus this fiscal year, and its revenues have been coming in above forecasts in the current fiscal year.

Yet even with the teacher-compensation discussion removed from the reform proposal and other changes to the blueprint, the path to serious reform appears challenging.

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### **Withholding Judgment**

Although the basic proposal was released more than three months ago, legislators and interest groups remain cautious. The bill is 156 pages, after all, and it will take some time to evaluate it. Representative Linda Miller, a Bettendorf Republican who serves on the House Education Committee, said she needs to talk to teachers about the legislation, and "I don't think they've had the chance to digest the bill yet, either."

"I don't know if we have as many dislikes as we just have questions," said the ISEA's Bern prior to the bill being made public. "I don't think that there's anything that we actually dislike conceptually. It's all going to depend on the details."

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"The devil is always in the details, and until we have a chance to analyze the specifics, I'm tending to withhold at least some of my judgment on this," Quirnbach said a day after he'd received the bill. "A poison pill is often buried pretty deeply."

But if problematic details are *just* details, they can be overcome. What should concern Branstad is the resistance to a couple key aspects of his proposal.

Quirnbach said he has philosophical issues with at least two elements of the Branstad plan: retention of third-graders who can't pass a reading test, and the 3.0-grade-point-average requirement for entry into college teacher-prep programs.

On third-grade retention, he said, he has talked to school superintendents in his home county as well as people involved in education generally. "There is a lot of reluctance at least to the idea of flunking every third-grader who can't pass some state-mandated test," he said. "That's a significant consequence. Really what you're doing long-term is taking away a year of the kid's adult life. They graduate high school a year later, they get a job or go to college a year later. ... That's not something you undertake lightly."

The GPA requirement for teaching programs, he said, would be difficult to enforce (in terms of private and out-of-state institutions), would have unintended consequences, and would amount to micromanagement of Iowa's public universities. Plus, it could exacerbate teacher shortages in hard-to-fill areas. "Are we going to make it that much *more* difficult to recruit people in the STEM areas – science, technology, [engineering,] and math ... ?" he asked. "I'm on board with the goal. I have questions whether this is the right way to implement it."

Republican Miller was similarly skeptical of those two legislative mandates. On both, she said, she supports the goal. "I think there has to be leeway instead of absolutes ... ," she said of the GPA requirement. "I'm not averse to that as an expectation, but as black-and-white legislation demanding it ... I'm not sure I'm ready to go that far. ... The fact that we expect more from them [teacher-prep programs] than they are delivering currently, ... I think everybody in the state of Iowa can agree with [that]."

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Miller similarly said she supports the goal of having all students read at grade level in third grade. "I do think it's important to tell parents this is what our expectation is," she said. "We've never done that before. We haven't been clear about what our goals are."

But she stressed that she's hesitant to support such rigid rules. "We have to be careful of the unintentional consequences when we make Band-Aids," she said. "I'm kind of a less-is-better person at this point in time ... . But I do believe that we have to be clear in what our expectations are in improving education."

And she added that sometimes the discussion itself can produce change without the legislature taking action. "The fact that we are actually discussing this is good," she said, "because it actually does bring about change kind of just by consensus, rather than legislative change." She said that Branstad's reform proposals have prompted discussion about teacher-preparation programs in Iowa's higher-education community.

Bern said that while the ISEA supports an increased emphasis on early-childhood literacy, it too has issues with third-grade retention. He said there's a contradiction between the governor's support of competency-based education – in which students advance at their own pace – and the third-grade-retention proposal.

### **Toothless Noble Goals?**

There are several dangers to Branstad's plan in these specific objections.

First, third-grade literacy/retention has arguably the highest profile among his proposals, and Glass said teacher selectivity has the potential to have a lot of stand-alone impact. If those get watered down or eliminated, the plan overall loses a good deal of its boldness.

Second, a reluctance to attach a genuine "pressure" (in Glass' terminology) to the early-literacy and teacher-selectivity components might reflect a general reluctance to put teeth in education reform. Noble goals without clear repercussions are unlikely to have the desired impact.

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Quirnbach said he's not opposed to gauging progress through testing. But the state needs to be sure that it's not *over*-testing students. "We absolutely have to measure what we're doing," he said. "But on the other side, time taken up in testing is time taken away from instruction. Testing is not free."

The ISEA also frets about the Branstad emphasis on testing. "There's a lot of talk about assessments – there's kindergarten assessments and end-of-course exams and college-entrance exams and so forth," Bern said. "One of the questions is: What are we going to do with all that information? How's it going to be used?"

The ISEA worries that school districts will place undue weight on student-achievement scores in evaluating teachers and making personnel decisions. "If they use a standardized test, and make it a major part of the teacher evaluation, we would not be in favor of that," Bern said.

Glass addressed that concern, saying that student achievement should be "used as a validating component of an evaluation" where available and appropriate. A positive teacher evaluation should be accompanied by large student-achievement gains. "Where those things aren't lining up, then I think there are some questions to be raised at the local level about the capacity of the evaluation system," he said. School districts, however, would make decisions about how much student assessments play into teacher evaluations, he said.

The ISEA is also concerned that new mandates aren't accompanied by new tools. "There's no talk about how we're going to support educators in doing their jobs – in getting students ready for these assessments," Bern said. "For example, there's no talk about professional development. And there's no talk about preparation time ... ." (Branstad's plan actually does address professional development by having the Department of Education dictate target areas for the state's nine Area Education Agencies.) There's further concern, Bern said, about unfunded mandates.

These are details, yet they're important ones rooted in philosophical differences. And it's in the details rather than the overarching goals that any reform will (or won't) be ultimately successful.

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## Sidebar: What's in Branstad's Proposal?

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Governor Terry Branstad's education-reform proposal contains 26 components in three basic areas. Below are short summaries of each element.

A PDF of the proposal can be found at [RCReader.com/y/edproposal](http://RCReader.com/y/edproposal) . A PDF of the legislation – Senate Study Bill 3009 and House Study Bill 517 – as introduced can be found at [RCReader.com/y/3009](http://RCReader.com/y/3009)

### Section I: Great Teachers and Leaders

**1) Iowa Education Job Clearinghouse.** “Establishes a statewide Web-based education employment system where every public preK-12 education job in the state is posted and applicants complete one application.”

**2) Improving Teacher Preparation Program Selectivity and Student Teaching.** “Include[s] raising standards for entry into teacher-preparation programs to include having at least a 3.0 cumulative college GPA and passing a pre-professional skills test in the top 75 percent nationally.”

**3) Alternative Pathways into the Education Profession.** “Includes widening alternative pathways to allow teachers, principals, and superintendents to come into the profession from non-traditional pathways. Quality is paramount, so the same GPA and assessment requirements of the traditional pathway also would be required of alternative pathways. Candidates in alternative routes would be required to undergo training in teaching or

administration and have practical experience under a mentor before gaining full licensure status.”

**4) Bringing Educator Licensure into the Iowa Department of Education.** “Moving licensure [from the Iowa Board of Educational Examiners] into the Department of Education, where a new internal structure will be created focusing on educator effectiveness.”

**5) Educator Evaluation.** “Calls for all teachers and administrators to be evaluated at least annually, rather than the every-three-years model we have in place now for non-probationary educators. The proposal formally creates a standing task force to continually improve the evaluation systems for educators and calls for the state to build uniform systems of evaluation with supporting electronic data-collection programs.”

**6) Extending Teacher and Administrator Probationary Status to Five Years.** “Giving schools more time to make a good judgment about whether a person is going to be an effective educator before additional job protections are provided.”

**7) Educator Non-Renewal and Dismissal.** “Would have probationary educators (in their first five years) who are under-performing be subject to contract nonrenewal at the end of any school year. For non-probationary educators (sixth year and thereafter) who are under-performing and any educator being dismissed for good cause, this proposal calls for the school board to make a determination on terminating an educator's contract based on the employee's annual evaluation or other evidence. One outside adjudicator review would be allowed to make sure the employee was evaluated fairly and provided due process in the evaluation and nonrenewal process.”

**8) Ending Seniority-Based or “Last-In-First-Out” Layoffs.** “Would require that performance be the primary determinant in making layoff decisions. While seniority could be considered as part of the decision, it would be secondary to employee performance and needs of the school district.”

**9) School Administration Manager Program.** “Helps give principals the time to focus on instruction by delegating some time-consuming tasks of building management to other staff members.”

**10) Strategically Aligning Professional Development.** "Would have the Department of Education annually target areas for professional development based on state needs and direction."

**11) A Task Force on Teacher Leadership and Compensation.** "Asks the legislature to create a state task force to study these important issues and to make recommendations in time for the 2013 legislative session."

## Section II: High Expectations and Fair Measures

**12) Continuing and Expanding the Work of the Iowa Core.** "A tightly aligned education system should have consistency from the standards to the curriculum and in the assessments."

**13) Kindergarten Readiness Measures.** "Would have all four-year-olds in the state voluntary preschool program complete a kindergarten-readiness assessment that would determine early literacy and numeracy skills."

**14) High School End-of-Course Exams.** "Calls for the development of [standardized] end-of-course exams in core areas such as algebra, English, science, and U.S. history. ... Over time, the results on this suite of assessments would be used as a component of graduation."

**15) The Programme for International Student Assessment.** "Calls for a sampling of about 3,000 students in the ninth grade to take the PISA every three years, following the same procedures of countries all over the world. Data from this assessment will give Iowa information on how well our education system is doing versus the international competition our students will face once they graduate."

**16) College and Career Readiness Measures.** "Calls for all 11th-grade students to take a college-entrance exam."

**17) Value-Added Measures (VAM).** “A method of analyzing assessment data that accounts for student background and demographics in determining whether students are making expected growth from year to year. ... Calls for making VAM available at the individual student, teacher, grade, school, and district levels.”

**18) Statewide Literacy Program.** “Calls for all students, beginning in preschool, to be taught with an evidence-based reading program that covers the five components of reading. ... Students finishing third grade who do not meet basic literacy requirements across a broad set of measures would be retained and provided intensive reading assistance that could include one-on-one or small-group reading supports, summer-school programs, or specialized tutoring.”

**19) Project Lead the Way.** “A project-based and hands-on middle school and high school science, technology, engineering, and math curriculum. ... Makes Project Lead the Way eligible for concurrent enrollment supplemental weighted funding for high-school/community-college credit.”

### Section III: Innovation

**20) Innovation Acceleration Fund.** “Calls for the creation of an Innovation Acceleration Fund with money from the state, from philanthropies and foundations, and from the business sector. These funds would be available to schools and to community-based nonprofit organizations across Iowa through a competitive-bid process.” Of the \$25-million price tag for Branstad's proposals, \$2 million would go toward this fund.

**21) Competency-Based Education.** “This [current] time-based system is the root of the outdated ‘industrial’ or ‘factory’ model of education. The truth is, some students don't need the seat-time requirements we have now, while others need more. ... Removes barriers to schools choosing to adopt competency-based systems.”

**22) Online Learning.** “Creates two pathways for online learning in schools across Iowa.”

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**23) Charter Schools.** “Would provide a wider pathway for charters. School districts could still start charter schools, but so could universities, community colleges, and nonprofit organizations, as well as collaborative efforts of all these groups.”

**24) Increased Waiver Authority.** “Would provide school districts the same flexibility that charter schools have. It would give the director of the Department of Education the authority to waive compliance with rule or statute for schools wishing to use an innovative approach that isn't currently allowed.”

**25) Statewide Parent Engagement Network.** “Iowa currently has a system called the Iowa Parent Information Resource Center ... . This program has been effective at increasing parent engagement and student achievement in the schools where it has operated. ... Would take this system statewide with a tiered model of supports.”

**26) Task Force on Time and Schools.** “In town-hall meetings on education across the state, Iowans asked how school calendars, extended days, and the extended year fit into the broader discussions on reform. ... Calls for a statewide Task Force on Time & Schools to convene and study this complex (and often contentious) issue and make recommendations to the legislature for the 2013 session.”

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