

2001 Iowa Legislative Session Emphasizes Education

Written by Kathleen McCarthy
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Across the board, education is at the top of what appears to be a bipartisan agenda for Iowa's 2001 legislative session. The 79th General Assembly convened Monday, January 8, and will continue for 110 calendar days due to the year's odd number.

In reports throughout the week, Democrat and Republican politicians claimed education as their collective number-one priority. But the reforms being considered for education are not without controversy.

State Senator Maggie Tinsman (R-Davenport) explains, "Education is really hot. We are going to be talking about establishing teacher compensation based on student achievement and upgraded skills. We are considering a 'career ladder' to give teachers a professional career track to follow that attaches increases in their compensation as they move up the ladder. The career ladder will include compliance with local and national professional standards, with a National Board Certificate awarded at the top of the ladder."

Much of the controversy lies in the debate over teachers' salaries and minimum and variable pay. The Davenport and Bettendorf School Districts are currently above such proposed minimums. Even so, Senator Tinsman claims that most school superintendents are against such a measure because minimums will take funds away from other programs.

Also part of the controversy is how to ensure that the same quality level of education will prevail throughout districts and statewide. Rural schools and schools in lower-income neighborhoods have traditionally suffered under the current system. Senator Tinsman explains how the reforms will compensate: "First of all, the individual schools would have their own 'building' goals that conform to state and national goals. But each school will be able to tailor its goals to address both deficiencies and proficiencies. The legislature is discussing including a provision for a 5% differential for shortage areas of learning skills, such as math or reading. This way, if one school is less proficient in math skills, teachers can establish specific goals to address the particular deficiencies that better reflect their school's needs. The goals must align with district goals and meet academic professional standards and assessments. If the school reached its goals, then teachers will receive bonuses as an entire school. Obviously, all schools would not receive bonuses, and it creates competition within the districts themselves. But this could be a good thing because it will create incentives, hopefully causing schools to become more efficient, and it will hold teachers and administrators within individual schools accountable for their own success."

The need for education reforms is seen in tandem with economic development. One of the biggest problems, according to Senator Tinsman, is that Iowa is not competitive enough to retain teachers. "We are educating the best and brightest at our colleges and universities, but we aren't keeping them in Iowa to teach. We could very well have provided San Antonio, Texas, with most of their teaching staff. They offer a \$30,000 signing bonus to each teacher they recruit. Texas is just one example. We need to get on board with these kinds of incentives."

Economic development cannot occur without attracting a young, skilled workforce, but it isn't just about jobs. It is about quality of life—amenities that include cultural and recreational opportunities, along with strong schools and diverse educational opportunities. A younger

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workforce typically looks for good schools for their new families, and for affordable housing that offers security and safety, as well as a good investment, in communities that are growing and thriving. So education is fundamental to economic development.

Senator Tinsman articulated additional areas of concern: “The ‘Zero-to-Five- Ready-To-Learn’ program [for pre-schoolers to kindergarten] must be given additional support and local empowerment. We need to more fully support youth-directed smoking prevention. We must enact mental-health parity for medical insurance. We should improve the child-protection system in Scott County by instituting a review team made up of law enforcement, social services, the hospitals, doctors, and schools. We should consider replicating a program in Cedar Rapids that deals with neighborhood education on substance abuse, parenting skills, and domestic violence because these things are intrinsically connected. We should require mandatory registering, at a minimum, of child-care facilities. No such requirement exists at present. We must negotiate lower costs on products and services for Medicare and Medicaid recipients, especially Medicaid. We should also reverse taxation of Social Security benefits. Thirteen states already do this. We need to consider a long-term-care insurance tax credit so that the younger population can afford to buy such insurance now, while they are young and the rates are lower. Finally, we need to increase sentencing reform, using such measures as a drug court in Scott County, instead of building more prisons.”

Senator Tinsman will serve on the following legislative committees: Health & Human Rights Appropriations Sub-Committee—Chair; Human Resource—Vice Chair; Education; Judiciary; and Appropriations; as well as lobbying the Ways & Means Committee on the tax issues as stated above.

Also of interest this year is the redistricting of Iowa now that the 2000 Census has been completed, as required by law. The law mandates that every district have the same number of people, so the district boundaries are changed to accommodate the requirement. The Legislative Services Bureau (LSB) will conduct the redistricting process, which is computerized for easier application.

The State of Iowa has a highly effective website for those interested in following the 79th Legislative Session. Log on to www.legis.state.ia.us, where visitors can view all the bills being considered, look at the committee calendars, and even listen to the live debates on the House and Senate Floors as they occur. The first nine weeks of the Session usually entail committee meetings, drafting, and introducing bills (done by the LSB), while the second half includes the debates and floor activities.