



Iowa Needs Democrats for Education Reform

By Deborah D. Thornton

Every Democrat member of the Iowa Legislature was opposed to Governor Branstad's preschool voucher program, and many have expressed concerns about his recently proposed overall education reforms. However, not all Democrats in other Legislatures in other states are opposed to the use of a scholarship or expanded open enrollment programs to address learning failures. Neither are all Democrat Legislators opposed to the host of significant education reforms being proposed for government schools nationwide.

Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) is a political action committee whose mission is to "encourage a more productive dialogue within the Democratic Party on the need to fundamentally reform public education."¹ They support major reforms such as parental school choice, funding following the child, closing failing schools, opening new charter schools, and increased teacher accountability. They think ideas such as mayoral control of urban school districts, educational flexibility, and state standards with local control have merit and should be implemented. DFER members in other states are willing to support reforms to tenure systems and merit pay for teachers.

Leaders of DFER base their support for these reforms on the premise that the Democrat Party was formed to "fight on behalf of our nation's most vulnerable individuals."² The most vulnerable individuals, the ones who need and deserve our very best efforts, as Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel (Democrat) said recently, are our children.

DFER members believe, like New Jersey Governor Chris Christie (Republican), that the education status quo must be challenged and that "tinkering" around the edges is not working and will not work. They too believe that the government monopoly is derailing the education freedom train for low-income and minority students and that 50 years after *Brown vs. Board of Education* the continued failure of the government schools in teaching minority students is unacceptable. As the test evidence shows, in Iowa the government education monopoly is not only failing low-income and minority students but also middle-class white children.

DFER has chapters in California, Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, the state of Washington, and Wisconsin.³ Unfortunately, Iowa does not have a branch of DFER, and the national organization indicated that no work was being done here. Many DFER groups and their members have been influential in education reforms proposed by Republican Governors, and they have offered both key support and valuable critiques of the proposals being debated and implemented.

A wide variety of education reform proposals and ideas are being discussed, both in Iowa and nationwide. Some are working, some may work, and some may not. What is clear is that what

A Publication of: **Public Interest Institute at Iowa Wesleyan College**

600 North Jackson Street, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa 52641-1328

If you wish to support our efforts, please donate by sending a check to us at the above address.

If you wish to donate by credit card, please go to our website: www.LimitedGovernment.org.

PII is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization and all contributions are tax deductible.

E-Mail: Public.Interest.Institute@LimitedGovernment.org

Phone: 319-385-3462 Fax: 319-385-3799

we are currently doing and have done for the last 50 years is not working.

What the DFER does not recommend is refusing to address the educational issues at hand. They do not recommend that Democrat Legislators refuse to work towards and find common ground with Republican Legislators and Republican Governors by opposing all reform proposals on a straight party-line vote. They do not recommend continuing to do the same old thing, but just spending more money to do it.

Iowa Senate President Mike Gronstal and Democrat members of both the Iowa Senate and House of Representatives would do well to adopt such an approach before the next Legislative session. We must find common ground. A straight party-line vote against anything and everything the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and Republican Governor propose will not work.

Above all, Democrats for Education Reform do not recommend dawdling while children's lives are wasting. In that they are in complete agreement with Governor Christie, who said at Governor Branstad's Education Summit in July, "We can decide today that the interest of these children is more important than how we decide political winning and losing...To say that change is necessary does not mean that you hate public education."⁴

"Forget about who you want to blame...Let's put that aside and let's see what we can agree on," Christie said. "Can't we agree that there is failure?...In the yelling and screaming that's going on about education in this country, we miss that. There is failure, and that failure has real-life ramifications for those children. They're the ones whose future is restricted."

Christie finished, "Why is it that we still operate a [education] system that does not reward excellence and does not give consequences for failure?"⁵

Membership in Democrats for Education Reform is free – Iowa Legislators should sign up because Iowa voters do have a habit of rewarding excellence and issuing consequences for failure.

Public Interest Institute's POLICY STUDY, "We Must Find Common Ground, Children's Lives Are Wasting," can be viewed at <http://www.limitedgovernment.org/publications/pubs/studies/ps-11-8.pdf>.

(Endnotes)

¹ "About Us," Democrats for Education Reform, <<http://www.dfer.org/about/>> accessed on August 22, 2011.

² "Statement of Principles," Democrats for Education Reform, <<http://www.dfer.org/about/principles/>> accessed on August 22, 2011.

³ "Branches," Democrats for Education Reform, <<http://www.dfer.org/branches/>> accessed on August 22, 2011.

⁴ O. Kay Henderson, "Chris Christie: let's 'find unity' on education reform," July 25, 2011, <<http://okhenderson.com/2011/07/25/chris-christie-lets-find-unity-on-education-reform-audio/>> accessed on August 23, 2011.

⁵ Ibid.

Deborah D. Thornton is a Research Analyst with Public Interest Institute, Mount Pleasant, Iowa. Contact her at Public.Interest.Institute@LimitedGovernment.org.

Permission to reprint or copy in whole or part is granted, provided a version of this credit line is used: "Reprinted by permission from INSTITUTE BRIEF, a publication of Public Interest Institute." The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of Public Interest Institute. They are brought to you in the interest of a better-informed citizenry.