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Talking change but preferring the status quo

By Ari Kaufman

When I taught school in urban Los Angeles, my father once came to visit my class. He sat in the back for six hours observing, then told me he could easily teach my social studies classes, despite lacking a teaching credential. He has a history degree from Cornell, is articulate and gregarious, and therefore I didn't disagree, even though I truly thought it would be rough for him, especially behavioral control of rowdy teenagers.

But now, four years removed from teaching, many published articles and a book later, I agree with my dad: He surely could teach high school history without a credential, based upon his knowledge of the subject. Everything else would eventually fall into place.

Indiana's Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tony Bennett, concurs. His "controversial" plan, introduced this past summer, seeks to "improve schools by improving teachers." It's a novel idea, and is naturally opposed by teachers seeking the status quo, who often fear necessary change.

In fact, educators and academics are so distraught over these plans that they gathered Tuesday at IUPUI to challenge Bennett's ideas. Their main argument: "Teachers don't teach content; they teach students." One might ask what on earth that cliché means, but I can tell you it's pabulum in faculty lunchrooms across America.

Local news reports called Bennett's changes "radical." In effect, however, they're simple and imperative for the future success of our children. And since we realize how misinformation can obfuscate even the best plans, here is what Bennett actually seeks:

Streamlining the re-licensing and professional development of existing teachers.

Making it easier for other professionals to become teachers.

Requiring future educators to earn more college credits in the subjects they intend to teach, and fewer on how to teach.

"Our goal is to ensure educators are highly knowledgeable in the content areas they're teaching," Bennett said. "These licensing recommendations will put the focus on teachers' content knowledge and instructional skill while giving teachers and administrators greater flexibility and freedom to improve instructional quality."

Educators, no doubt apoplectic over Bennett's lack of interest in the "how" portion of instruction, claim the proposals "degrade the profession." But there's an enticing caveat: With the new system, Indiana is now eligible to obtain a portion of \$4.35 billion in federal competitive grants. That information changed the persuasion of one group.

"We believe changes we discussed will be better for the kids and that is the ultimate goal," said Teresa Meredith, Indiana State Teachers Association vice president.

This shocked but pleased me, as in Los Angeles, it was more common to find homeless celebrities than unions in agreement with reform advocates.

As we witnessed during the state budget debate in June, which had an overwhelming focus on education, these debates speak a different tone in various parts of Indiana. Smaller districts are less concerned with funding and more concerned with staffing flexibility, thereby supporting Bennett's plan more so than groups in bigger districts.

In those larger locales, forces against change are ready for resistance, hopeful that knowledge of a subject is not the main criterion for evaluation.

"Without the capacity to differentiate and know how students learn and teach the individual students, that knowledge can be irrelevant at times because we don't teach content. We teach students," said Nicole Law on Tuesday night in Indianapolis. Law, a principal in Wayne Township, was recipient of a \$25,000 National Educator Award in 2008.

In the end, like many Americans, teachers enjoy talking about change, but regularly prefer the status quo.

As the Washington Post's Michael Kinsey pointed out a few weeks ago: "Americans are in total agreement that change is essential, in the abstract. But as soon as it seems that change might actually happen, we panic. We suddenly develop nostalgia for the comforts of the status quo. Sure, we want change -- as long as everything can stay just as it is."
