

Reforms in Public Education

By David Shaffer

We have entered an era where nearly everyone is talking about the importance of reforms in public education. We certainly want to work to improve the product which we are developing and reform is generally the agreed upon best action to accomplish improvement. The last General Assembly session provided for a number of reforms for public education. It becomes our responsibility to enact these legislated reforms to the best of our ability and for the most positive impact upon our students. Reform legislation included the enactment of a school choice program with a voucher credit for parents who select approved private and parochial schools, a revision in the manner in which we evaluate the performance of teachers and administrators, and limits on what the teacher collective bargaining contract may include as well as varied requirements on how teacher salary increases will be calculated. These new laws represent a major course direction in public education.

We have begun to work on the mandated changes here in Brown County. We also have initiated a number of major curriculum and facility improvements which are designed to place Brown County Schools in a favorable situation when compared with other school districts and other schools. Our reasoning in working on these initiatives is simply that we are striving to provide the highest quality of education for our students, which transcends any state or federal mandates. This is far easier to talk about than it is to actually accomplish. While we are in a state of working on reforms and improvements within Brown County Schools, I will reference several of these initiatives in this column. A further motivation in our movement toward initiatives is that we believe we have entered a time period in which there is truly competition among schools to attract and keep students enrolled in Brown County Schools. We want to position Brown County Schools into a role where parents will compare us with other schools and decide that what we offer is the best alternative for their children.

Teachers remain the single major factor in the quality of instruction in the classroom. Brown County Schools employs many outstanding educators, some with a great deal of teaching experience and others who are young and bring fresh innovative ideas to our faculty group. Our current group of teachers is a source of pride for the District and we work very diligently when we have a position open. Our faculty compares very favorably with other area schools.

I will point to several curriculum initiatives designed to position us as the best option for parents who now have the ability to select the school best suited for their children. First, we continue to work on the delivery of Balanced Literacy. This is a curricular program that involves the teaching of reading, writing, and language arts. There is general agreement that the instruction of reading is our foremost responsibility. Indiana will administer its first Third Grade Reading Test this spring. Our program involves the encouragement of students, the ability for them to select books which interest them and the usage of books that are written on a variety of reading levels. Our Reading Workshops now parallel our Writing Workshops. Students are receiving a defined amount of reading and writing time on a daily basis. Our testing results are verifying that these programs are working for our students.

A similar initiative in Mathematics instruction is in progress. Students are receiving daily Mathematics instruction for a defined period of one hour per day unless they are falling behind. In those instances we are providing additional class time to help them improve their deficiencies. Again, our test scores support the fact that the initiative is working.

In Science we have renovated the Science laboratories in the Junior High and the High School. We are currently involved in the addition of a dedicated science laboratory at Sprunica Elementary with plans to include the other schools over the next year. Science instruction in laboratory facilities will place our students in an advantageous circumstance over other students. Our students will have experiences that are not provided in other schools. We believe we will generate greater interest in Science among all of our students.

There are other curriculum initiatives such as Project Lead the Way at BCHS and our new Industrial Tech laboratory program at BCJH. We take pride in the Districts Fine Arts programs and the extra opportunities beyond the school day. Our academic extra-curricular activities include subject area competitions. Dual credit and Advanced Placement courses allow our high school students to earn college credits while still at BCHS. Enrichment and remediation is available as needed by students at each level.

We want to invite potential parents including those who have chosen to home school their children to come in and look at our schools and meet our teachers and principals. We want all of the students who live in Brown County to attend our schools and we want those who live in adjoining counties to consider us as an educational option as well.