Three ideas to make Arkansas public schools the best

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The days when Arkansas public schools were a national laughingstock are behind us. Thanks to a series of pre-education governors and state legislators of both parties, dedicated state commissioners of education, capable public school teachers and administrators, and supportive businesses and parents, our public schools are now often scoring at national norms.

However, the benchmarks today are not set by Massachusetts or Iowa, but by Singapore and Finland. And while Arkansas public schools as a whole have improved, some communities have been left behind.

So how can newly appointed Arkansas Commissioner of Education Tom Kimbrell continue our progress? Any commissioner faces the danger of losing focus amidst a never-ending flow of paperwork and ceremonial events. So instead of 100 new things, we want Commissioner Kimbrell to push three big ideas to take our public schools to the next level.

First, Commissioner Kimbrell should expand efforts to recruit a larger and better pool of teachers, and to get more of the new recruits into under-served communities. Research finds little evidence that students learn more from traditionally certified teachers. Many private schools across the country have remarkable student outcomes produced by teachers without formal state certification. We can learn from that.

Arkansas does allow alternative certification, but the process typically takes two years. We argue that someone with a college degree and good content knowledge like a college instructor, a private school teacher, or a practicing attorney, should be able to earn certification in a year or less.

If Commissioner Kimbrell expands and brands alternative certification, we'll have a larger pool of teachers, ready quickly to fill specialties like science, math and ESL, and in hard to serve rural communities.

Second, Commissioner Kimbrell has talked about cutting red tape, but it's time for action. Traditional public schools must send the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) more than 70 reports annually! Supposedly "unregulated" public charter schools have the ADE monitor 165 school practices, up from 92 in 2005. State level mandates include having a policy to address challenged materials, an annual curriculum review, having a single computer for administrative purposes only, attendance policies, homework policies, mandatory board training, medication release forms, SmartCore curriculum parent consent forms, cell phone usage, and the list goes on. While some mandates are doubt laudable, it seems to us that school districts utilizing the best practices should be left to decide programs, policies and goals.

The problem is that more paperwork and regulation do not bring better schooling, as management scholar William Ouchi shows in his new book, The Secret of TSL. Schools which give more power to principals and less to central office administrators focus more on student needs, and tend to lower the total student load (TSL) of teachers. Lower TSL schools have higher morale, and better test scores. And if we want our public schools to succeed, then the paperwork, filled out by the average principal should weigh less than the average teacher.

President Bill Clinton used teams of public servants to reinvent government purchasing and operations, saving over $140 billion and improving customer service. Commissioner Kimbrell should follow the lead of his fellow Arkansans and form a commission of principals, superintendents and business consultants to cut red tape.

Third, special education is a hot potato that no one wants to touch, but we must do more to address the needs of the 55,000 Arkansas students labeled as special education. Since the passage of PL 94-142 in 1976, special education has indeed removed the straitjackets and brought under-served kids into public education. There is much to be proud of here.

Yet problems remain. Special education operates as an "input" only model. It is time for Arkansas to lead the way in looking at special education student outcomes. We spend mega dollars getting kids into special education and keeping them there, but almost never look at outcomes. It's high time to change that. Similarly, we must better define what we mean by "disabilities" in scientifically validated medical or psychological terms. Because of imprecision in the operational definitions of disabilities, many parents now view special education services as an entitlement. When we have parents scrumbling to have their child labeled in this way, things have gone terribly wrong.

Again, Commissioner Kimbrell should empower a committee of school officials, medical professionals and special education parents to come up with ways for the system to work better and more equitably with less paperwork, and he needs to do it well before the next legislative session.

With less emphasis on bureaucratic processes and more on serving our students, there is no reason to think that Arkansas public schools cannot lead the nation, and even the world.

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