



Bennett's tune: A golden oldie worth keeping

By Jim Waters

The Kentucky Board of Education now seeks its third commissioner in three years.

I hold little hope that the third time will be a charm.

So I have an idea for attracting stunning resumes and better candidates: Rename the job “Chief Negotiator for the Union of Kentucky’s Children.”

This would quickly eliminate those just interested in a fat taxpayer-funded salary and a new car with all the bells and whistles — like the previous commissioner — or those who just want to get along with the political class— also like the previous commissioner — from those genuinely interested in doing whatever it takes to achieve a brighter future for Kentucky students.

Students would get a leader who wants to ensure they succeed when the noble goal of learning collides with the ideology of those whose sole intent is propping up the shaky foundations of a faltering education system.

If the next commissioner doesn’t make the grade, politicians and bureaucrats will remain content to fritter away money and time addressing inconsequential issues while ignoring Kentucky’s catastrophic high dropout rates and graduates unprepared for the rigors of college and the workforce.

Indiana’s new education chief, Tony Bennett, recently declared himself the official representative of Hoosier students, or as he puts it, “the union of Indiana children.”

This Tony Bennett certainly sings a different tune than we often hear in Kentucky. He shows how an inspirational, innovative leader can tip the balance of the commonwealth’s education scales in the right direction – toward success for our kids.

Meanwhile, search experts working on finding Kentucky’s next education commissioner twice have “left their hearts” and brains elsewhere. They prefer B.B King’s song “Same Old Story,” which contains this line: “One hand will take, one hand will give. That's all we know and that is how we live.”

Indiana’s Bennett offers a classic tune. He promises to “get along fine until what’s best for the children collides with other interests.” When that happens, Bennett promises to “engage” the obstructionists.

“I am going to stand up every day and say that I represent a union and I represent the union of Indiana children,” he recently told the Indianapolis Star. “And I am going to represent my membership by talking

to this state and saying to this state, ‘If we don’t become nationally and internationally competitive, our state and our nation will suffer.’”

The most recent national testing results determined that 35 percent of eighth-grade Hoosiers achieved proficiency in math, compared with only 27 percent in Kentucky.

Neither result gets a gold star. But at least Indiana turned the corner by bringing on the likes of Bennett, who just started and already talks about the “legal responsibility — but even more than that, a moral responsibility — to make sure our schools are the best.”

So it would be wrong to conclude that I’m “anti-union.” I wholeheartedly — and with unfettered enthusiasm — endorse the “Union of Kentucky’s Children.”

Why? The students represent the major stakeholders when it comes to education. With their future at stake, shouldn’t they at least have a seat at the table among education’s powerful and influential decision-makers?

If not, who represents them? Even honest union members admit a teachers-union rep won’t.

Albert Shanker, the late American Federation of Teachers president, once said: “When students start paying union dues, I’ll start representing students.”

Compare that approach with Bennett’s: “To me, I got into education for kids, and if I’m not willing to put my money where my mouth is for all kids, I’m doing nothing but preserving an establishment.”

You can sing that song all day long, Tony.

— *Jim Waters is director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky’s free-market think tank. Reach him at jwaters@freedomkentucky.com. Read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.*