

WATCH OUT FOR SCHOOL CHILDREN



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In a recent conference of the National Association of State Universities, the University of Oklahoma's new president, Dr. Frank E. Horton, emphasized the point that society's need for educated people has grown tremendously in recent years and will continue to grow. I couldn't agree more.

Our nation—and our state—is experiencing a remarkable transition, moving first from an agriculturally based society through the industrial age and into today's information society. It is imperative that we provide the quality of education, on both the public school level and the university

level, which will equip our young people to cope with these changes and build successful lives for themselves.

This charge is the fundamental responsibility of our public school system. Because we recognize that responsibility, we have proposed, and are implementing, a series of specific initiatives which will meet that challenge. Those initiatives include:

1. Maintaining the momentum education has already built;
2. Maintaining the focus on equality and excellence in our schools;
3. Forging partnerships; and
4. Orienting to the future.

As to the first point, education has

been receiving considerable attention from the media and the public, nationally and locally. How can having more attention focused on what we, as educators, are doing be used to improve student learning? Keeping people informed of the strengths of our schools is essential. They also should know about the areas which need improvement and the plans that are under way to bring about those improvements.

Mandating changes from the top down is no longer enough. The people who pay the bills are demanding—and have the right—to know what is happening. In the process of keeping the

public informed, however, we must put the emphasis on both the positive and the negative. In brief, we must sell our strengths while plotting action to correct our weaknesses, and thereby build a basis of support.

As to maintaining the focus on excellence, our second initiative, Oklahoma's public schools were far ahead of the pack at the time the first national report was issued from Washington on the crisis in education. As a result, we did not get the attention received by the states which began their reforms after the issuance of the Washington study.

Oklahoma already had begun increasing teacher salaries to attract higher quality personnel. Oklahoma already had obtained funding for development of 65 instructional related teacher guides. Suggested learner outcomes, such as curriculum guides, for grades one through eight have been developed and published. Learner outcomes from grades nine through twelve will be on the shelf very soon. Teachers and public school administrators soon will have in hand a research bulletin defining an "effective" school, so that instructional goals and school operations may be better integrated.

The third initiative being stressed in public school education—the need for forging partnerships — is extremely important. We must have partnerships between schools and parents, between schools and community organizations and, in particular, partnerships between schools and business.

We cannot achieve excellence alone. We must have interactive support. To this end I have created the Superintendent's Advisory Council, whose members represent a cross section of school administrators from throughout the state.

The vital need for partnerships is made clear by the correlation between educational excellence and high technology achievements. How better to capitalize on this evidence than through partnerships between education and business, so that each can serve the other?

Quality education is the essential ingredient in attracting high-tech in-

dustry to a given location. Since Oklahoma can no longer depend exclusively on agriculture and oil as a sound economic base, we must look elsewhere. There is no other place to look but at those businesses which are hurling us at break-neck speed into the information age, the "thinking" business.

For Oklahoma to have any real chance in this arena, we must make a serious commitment to rapid improvement in our system of education, ranging from kindergarten to the doctoral level. When this happens, the natural and inevitable alliance between business and education will flower.

Next fall Oklahoma's public schools will be in session, however strained their budgets, with most of the hard-won educational initiatives in place.

We will see a time when business will be involved in science, engineering and all applied technology, marching hand-in-hand with teachers, researchers, consultants and school administrators. We have begun to do some of these things, but we have barely scratched the surface.

The fourth point—orienting to the future—is critical. Massive societal changes are taking place—changes in our economy; changes in family values; changes in our concept of the world brought about by the ability to instantly communicate with all parts of the world; the compression of distance and the collapse of time resulting from the creations coming from our high-technology inventions, the computer, lasers, satellites, space exploration and others yet undreamed.

As much as anything, this new orientation relates directly to the point made by President Horton that we must have more and better-educated men and women than ever be-

fore. Better-educated men and women come into being because their education is built on basics. I would emphasize here, however, that the most valuable definition of basics includes learning how to learn, how to access, how to evaluate information—the higher-level thinking skills, critical-thinking skills and decision-making skills.

Oklahoma has demonstrated positive thinking and a clear vision of what the future can be. That vision includes a belief in placing a premium on development of the human mind, on the creation of high technology in the Sooner state and upon the need for a broader-based economic development.

Oklahoma's public school system can make its contribution toward that vision. The Oklahoma State Legislature placed a great deal of emphasis on improving public school education during the 1985 session. They increased funding to schools, raised teacher salaries and passed the Education Improvement Act of 1985 (H.B. 1466).

Since the enactment of these and other legislatively mandated improvements outlined below, the state has been hit with serious economic problems. The severe blows suffered by agriculture and oil have resulted in major shortfalls in tax revenues. Yet in our concern for our financial future, we should not overlook the importance of these first steps to improve Oklahoma's public school educational system.

In 1980, the legislature, with the assistance of the State Department of Education, initiated a model program for teacher education/certification and staff development. This was accomplished through the passage of H.B. 1706. High school graduation requirements were increased in 1982 with the passage of H.B. 1816.

The Education Improvement Act of 1985 (H.B. 1466), begins by stating that investment in improvements in Oklahoma's system of public education is particularly important to the revitalization of the state's economy. If the quality of education depends on the quality of teachers, the act goes on to say, then efforts to attract and

retain the highest quality teachers directly reflect the importance of this issue to the public and the legislature.

H.B. 1466 begins by amending the law which mandates maximum class size to reduce the teacher-pupil ratio over the next five years. The State Department of Education has been given funds and responsibility for administering the class size reductions from 25:1 to 20:1 over a five-year period. Priority for the class size reductions is with the first, second and third grades. Due to the financial situation, however, it has been recommended that a moratorium be placed on this mandate for one year.

The next significant provision of H.B. 1466 is the Oklahoma School Testing Program. Student academic achievement will be assessed through a norm-referenced test to be administered to all students in public school grades 3, 7 and 10. Local school districts are required to use the data to implement a specific program of improvement based on the test results.

The act also requires that the teacher evaluation policy of each local school district be based on a set of minimum criteria for effective teaching and administrative performance. The use of minimum criteria, developed by the State Department of Education, was passed by the legislature in response to teacher-initiated requests for the changes.

To help fulfill the requirements of the law, I appointed a statewide, geographically based, 25-member evaluative criteria committee. Their charge was to develop criteria based on effective teaching and schooling practices. I believe that sound, research-based teacher and administrator performance evaluations can be a powerful tool for school improvement. These evaluations need to be used as a diagnostic process to pursue more effective teacher performance in the improvement of instruction.

The law requires each teacher to be evaluated once each year beginning with the 1986-87 school year and that ". . . all personnel designated by the local board to conduct the personnel evaluations shall be required to participate in training conducted by the State Department of Education prior

to conducting such evaluations . . ."

To accomplish this task, a cadre of 35 professionals from the State Department of Education entered the field during the month of April to begin training local administrators. The administrators attending the training workshops are responsible for taking these materials back to their school systems in order to help familiarize their staffs with the use of the minimum criteria for effective teaching and administrative performance.



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Also from H.B. 1466, over a three-year period the State Board of Education is required to develop and implement a program to "screen all children who are or who will be enrolled in a public kindergarten for developmental readiness prior to entering and prior to exiting kindergarten." This screening shall be accomplished under the direction of the Regional Education Service Centers. Results of the screening must be transmitted to the

child's parents or legal guardian, teacher and school district administration.

Small school cooperatives, as described in H.B. 1466, are for school districts of less than 800 pupils in average daily attendance to conduct cooperative classes with one or more school districts of any size or an accredited institution of higher education. The targeted areas for cooperative classes are mathematics, science, foreign languages, computer education and music. Through this program, small schools can be aided in meeting increased graduation and college admission requirements. In this way, more than one school district can make use of the services and share the salary of the same teacher.

Mandatory school improvement plans are also an aspect of H.B. 1466. Every local school board will be developing and adopting a five-year improvement plan for their district. State accreditation will be contingent upon the adoption of this plan.

In the gifted and talented area each local board of education is required to adopt a written policy which specifies criteria for placement of children in these special programs. Beginning with the 1986-87 school year, students who score in the top 3 percent on any national standardized test of intellectual ability must be served.

In addition to the reform and improvement measures enacted by H.B. 1466, the state legislature added a total of \$142 million to the area of common education for the 1985-86 school year. These funds made possible an average \$2,000 increase in teacher salaries, an average 8 percent increase in support personnel salaries, \$25 million directly to schools and other significant increases in areas such as textbooks, instructional computers and library resources.

These improvements in our public education system are most significant because they position us to better prepare our students for the challenges of a higher education.

Education is part of a life-long learning process. The reward is without measure. It requires, however, the time, the talents and the resources of all Oklahomans. 