
Interview: Dr. William C. Boshers, Jr.

OBE opponent takes office in Virginia

Dr. William C. Boshers, Jr. was confirmed as Virginia's new Superintendent of Public Instruction on Jan. 20. He was appointed by newly elected Republican Gov. George Allen, who announced during his first address to the legislature that outcome-based education (OBE) in Virginia is "dead."

Dr. Boshers, 47, a Richmond native, has been Superintendent of Schools in Henrico County, just outside Richmond, since 1981.

As Henrico County superintendent, Dr. Boshers was the first Virginia school official to speak out against the Virginia OBE program, called World Class Education Initiative. In response to a call by the administration of Gov. Doug Wilder for discussion of the program, Dr. Boshers wrote a position paper on Sept. 9, 1993, in which he said that OBE "appears to focus on 'slices of life' in exchange for fundamental skills and knowledge which are essential to holding jobs and raising families. . . . As professionals, we must emulate values which enhance citizenship and integrity, but the only exam for these virtues should be life itself. . . . If we protect young people from failure, we may prepare them for limited success." He proposed that the state "drastically alter their proposal" to focus on "standards for subject area content."

This interview, which is excerpted here, was conducted on Jan. 21 by Marianna Wertz for New Federalist newspaper.

Q: While you were superintendent in Henrico you were known for having supported prayer in the schools. You told the legislature yesterday in your confirmation hearing that this is a "free speech" rather than a religious issue. How do you view what should be done in the state for those who support prayer in school?

Boshers: [In Henrico County] we worked closely with our attorneys to formulate a plan regarding enabling students to have prayer in high-school graduations. That plan is legally sound and, I think, is one which said to our students that we're not going to teach a dogma or a faith. I don't think that the public schools should be used as a vehicle for that. But they also should not be places that are so innocuous that we don't understand one another as people, and the diversity that we bring, and that includes a religion, a faith.

Q: You told the legislature yesterday that you have a "very strong faith." Do you believe that prayer has a positive impact on children?

Boshers: Faith is foremost in my own life. So whether they are young people in my family or those with whom I work, I believe that faith and the mechanisms within it, like prayer, are critical to our existence.

Q: Governor Allen has made it absolutely clear, as he said, that OBE is "dead and buried." Will there be any actions taken to eradicate some of what might be called the deeply entrenched parts of OBE?

Boshers: In schools, we need to make sure that we have nurturing, caring environments that are well-disciplined, but that we focus on those skills for which we can be accountable, and for which young people can find success that will inherently lead to other kinds of achievement.

Q: You also told the legislature that the state "should have left sex education up to families, but now that we're in that business, I would not mandate it," and that you would prefer an "opt-in" system rather than the current one. Can you comment on that?

Boshers: I actually opposed public school divisions being responsible for Family Life Education [as sex education is called in Virginia], with the belief that families and churches should be the primary providers, because those issues are very difficult to teach in the absence of value judgments. I would work on the belief that the issue of Family Life Education should be debated in front of local school boards and superintendents, and if one school system chooses to take one approach, even though it may not be an approach with which I would feel comfortable, that should be their decision.

Q: Are you familiar with the atrocity that's been occurring in New York City with respect to the Rainbow Curriculum?

Boshers: I watched that through the media. Let me say, if a locality chose to set up clinics and distribute contraceptive devices, I would have to personally oppose that, because I don't believe that that's a part of our mission. But I also believe in local autonomy. And the decisions made in one local school division may not look at all like the decisions made in another. So I would respect local debate on those issues, with that being the prevailing test.

Q: How do you view Goals 2000, the proposed federal legislation?

Boshers: With great concern and caution, because I think some of the efforts to focus on standards could be very compatible with our work, but some of the discussions of opportunity to learn involve the same kinds of affective things which were rejected in Virginia.