

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE FORMER STATE SUPERINTENDENT

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This is the 28th article I have written to help commemorate the Rush County Bicentennial in 2022. For this writing I interviewed Dr. Suellen (Kinder) Reed Goddard at the Rush County Historical Society Museum. We discussed her Rush County background and her lifelong campaign to promote improved education for all students.



Suellen was raised in Rush County. Her parents are Harold Kinder and Mary Jane (Perry) Kinder. She has one younger brother, Lloyd “Digger” Kinder. Members of the Kinder family originally lived in Washington Township but then moved to Noble Township. Suellen attended school at Clarksburg in the first grade, then attended school at Richland from second grade through eighth grade. She attended New Salem High School and graduated in 1963. Some of her favorite teachers during those formative years were Kevin Kile, Wilma Jo (Schroeder) Kile, Dick Dunn, and John Sam Anderson. As a student she enjoyed history, literature, and music. She participated in marching band. Outside of school she looked forward to her participation in 4-H, and she was a ten-year 4-H member.

After high school her education continued. First she graduated from Hanover College, then earned a Masters Degree from Ball State University. Later she obtained an administrative license from Florida Atlantic University at Boca Raton. After five years in Florida she came back to Indiana and completed her doctoral degree at Ball State. Some of Suellen’s influences during this period were Dr. Paul Rosewell at Hanover, Dr. Jack Reigle at Ball State, and locally Janet (Carr) Roberts who worked for Indiana National Bank and the FBI. Roberts lived to be 101.

Over her career Suellen taught at Shelbyville High School, Rushville Elementary, Connersville, and in Florida. She later served as Assistant Principal at Rushville Elementary, Principal at Frazee Elementary in Connersville, and the Assistant Superintendent at Rush County Schools from 1987-1991. Don Smith was Superintendent. When he took another position (East Central Education Service Center at Connersville), Suellen became Superintendent of Rush County Schools from 1991-1993.

Then came the opportunity to run for the position of Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state of Indiana. Dr. Reed was elected to four straight four-year terms as State Superintendent, and she served with four different governors; Evan Bayh, Frank O’Bannon, Joe Kernan, and Mitch Daniels. Suellen stated that of these four governors, Frank O’Bannon was the most supportive of the educational objectives she championed.

Suellen has been married twice. She does not have children of her own, but over her years of service she has considered all the school children she has taught or served as “her children”. She is a very organized, yet creative person. She admires those teachers and administrators that create learning situations outside the norm.

As the longest serving State Superintendent in Indiana History there were many accomplishments: Reforming Indiana’s Academic Standards, ISTEP+, Public Law 221-1999, Indiana’s Education Roundtable,

and P-16 Plan for Improving Student Achievement. Dr. Reed was presented no less than three Sagamore of the Wabash awards for her effort and dedication.

I asked Suellen about ISTEP testing (Indiana Statewide Tests for Educational Progress). She said the original intent of the testing was to identify those students that needed help; then help them. She laments that “today’s version of ISTEP testing is punitive.” Fear and pressure created by ISTEP has often created negative situations for students, teachers, and administrators.

Part of the problem is that education has increasingly become a political football. Offering parents a school choice has often been a higher priority than improving the existing public school. Some legislators seem to be less concerned about the students and more concerned about data that makes their district or neighborhood look good.

During Dr. Reed’s 16 years as State Superintendent she was sometimes at odds with the Governor’s Office. She restrained herself from public debate with the Governor and preferred to promote her ideas in private. She did not see her position as political; she saw it as “a calling” to do what was best for the students of Indiana.

She often traveled with whoever was Governor to promote business improvements in Indiana and the educational innovations needed to attract and sustain new businesses. Once in a photograph with Democrats she was criticized by some Republican leaders because she was smiling! Ironically, today the State Superintendent position is appointive once again. Suellen stated, “Because of political rancor, it was expedient to make it appointive.”

I asked Dr. Reed Goddard what was needed to help solve the current teacher shortage in the state. She answered, “Teachers need our support. Creativity has to be allowed. There has to be joy in teaching, or there will be no joy in learning.” She also commented, “Students need to understand there are consequences for their behavior. Without discipline, learning suffers.” As a former educator, this writer agrees. To attract new teachers and keep the teachers we have means the learning climate needs to change. The public and their elected representatives need to prioritize the education process, pay teachers a competitive salary, and give all educators the respect they deserve.

Dr. Reed retired from the State Superintendent position in 2008. She later accepted a consultant position with Ross Sinclair Associates. Today she enjoys gardening, checking on progress at her farm, and doing voluntary work with Rush County Retired Teachers, Rush County Community Foundation, New Salem Methodist Church, and local extension homemakers groups. The next time you see her, thank her for her service to our students and our state.