



REACHING HIGHER  
**IOWA**

*Opportunity Through Education*





## Our Mission

Reaching Higher Iowa is committed to advocating for a more effective Iowa K-12 public education system to provide opportunities for every child and family, and thereby to foster long-term economic growth in the state.

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## Mark Jacobs

*Founder of Reaching Higher Iowa*

A native Iowan, Mark Jacobs spent 25 years in business outside of Iowa before returning home to give back to the state that gave him his start.



Why volunteer in an effort to improve public education? First, Mark comes from a long line of educators. His grandfather was a school superintendent, and several other family members serve as classroom teachers today. Second, Mark is a product of Iowa's public schools, which provided him with the tools for success. Finally, Mark is a parent with children in Iowa public schools.

Prior to moving back to Iowa, Mark was President and CEO of Reliant Energy. Originally joining Reliant as CFO in 2002 when it was a troubled company, he was called to lead a turnaround that saved the company. In 2007, at the age of 45, he was named CEO, one of the youngest at the helm of a Fortune 500 company. Mark successfully navigated Reliant through a series of extreme challenges.

This background has given Mark valuable experience as a complex problem-solver. His success came from working in a collaborative manner, bringing together people with different interests and creating alignment around common objectives.

In addition to his leadership role in business, Mark has a long track record of leadership in civic and social issues, especially public education. His fervent belief that every child deserves a quality education led him to KIPP Houston Public Schools, a high-performing charter school network serving over 9,400 economically disadvantaged students and one of the great success stories in education reform. He served KIPP as a board member for six years, most recently as board chair.

Mark graduated from Roosevelt High School in Des Moines in 1980. He holds a B.B.A., cum laude, from Southern Methodist University (1984) and a Master of Management, with distinction, from Northwestern University (1989). Mark and his wife, Janet, have three children: Clark, Christy, and Sam. The family resides in West Des Moines.

## Our Challenge



Reaching Higher Iowa is an organization founded on the idea that education creates opportunity both for Iowa's children as well as the long-term economic growth of our state. Started by Mark Jacobs in January 2013, we're committed to advocating for a more effective Iowa K-12 public education system.

### *Iowa has lost its leadership position*

Iowans have always been proud of our schools. Generations grew up knowing that the Iowa Test of Basic Skills was the national standard. And our test scores reflected our self-image - first in the nation!

But Iowa - once the crown jewel of American public education - has dropped from first place to the middle of the pack. Many Iowans are unaware of the slipping performance of our children relative to other states.

Many of today's high school graduates are not prepared to enter college or the workforce with the skills needed to succeed.

Now ranked 24th in math and 31st in reading, Iowa's children are treading water while other states innovate and improve. We are doing a disservice to our children because they will be competing for jobs with those from other states and countries.

### *Great education means long-term vitality for Iowa*

The statistics are alarming. In 1950, only 40% of the jobs in Iowa required post-high school training. Today, that figure has grown to 81%. Our children are not prepared to meet the jobs of today or those of the future.

With better graduates and a highly educated workforce, Iowa can have a competitive advantage versus other states.

Just as important, college graduates earn, on average, 75% more than non-graduates, have significantly lower unemployment rates and lower incarceration rates. A great education is the foundation for our children to lead a productive, successful life.

A well-educated workforce is critical to attract new businesses to Iowa.

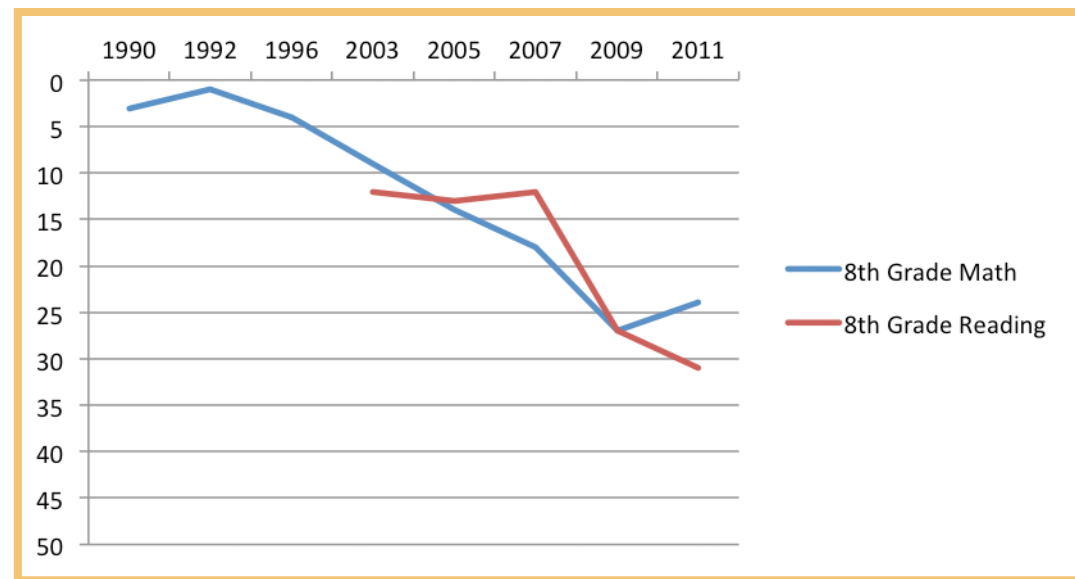
## Iowa's Fall from Leadership

Although Iowa hasn't seen a significant change in test scores over the past 20-plus years, we have seen a dramatic decline in our rankings. That's because other states have innovated and improved. Our decline is a product of the failure to improve.

In fact, Iowa is dead last in test score improvement over the last twenty years.

The numbers tell the story.

### Iowa's National Rank in Education



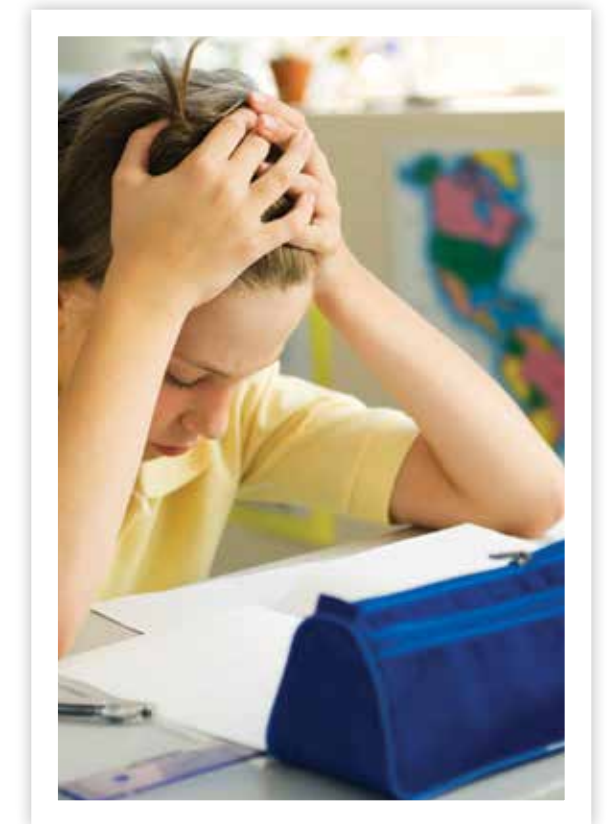
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center of Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress.

## Achievement Gap

Almost as alarming as the overall slippage of our test scores relative to the nation is the achievement gap faced by our poorest children.

We believe that every child, regardless of zip code, is capable of learning and preparing for the future. However, that is not happening today. By the time students reach the eighth grade, those growing up in low-income households are on average two and one-half grade levels behind their peers. Moreover, only 10% of our students from low-income households will go on to graduate from college.

This data undermines a basic sense of fairness that is the cornerstone of public education. More importantly, it damages the long-term health of our communities, trapping low-income districts in a dangerous cycle of joblessness and dependency on government support programs.



### College and Career Preparedness

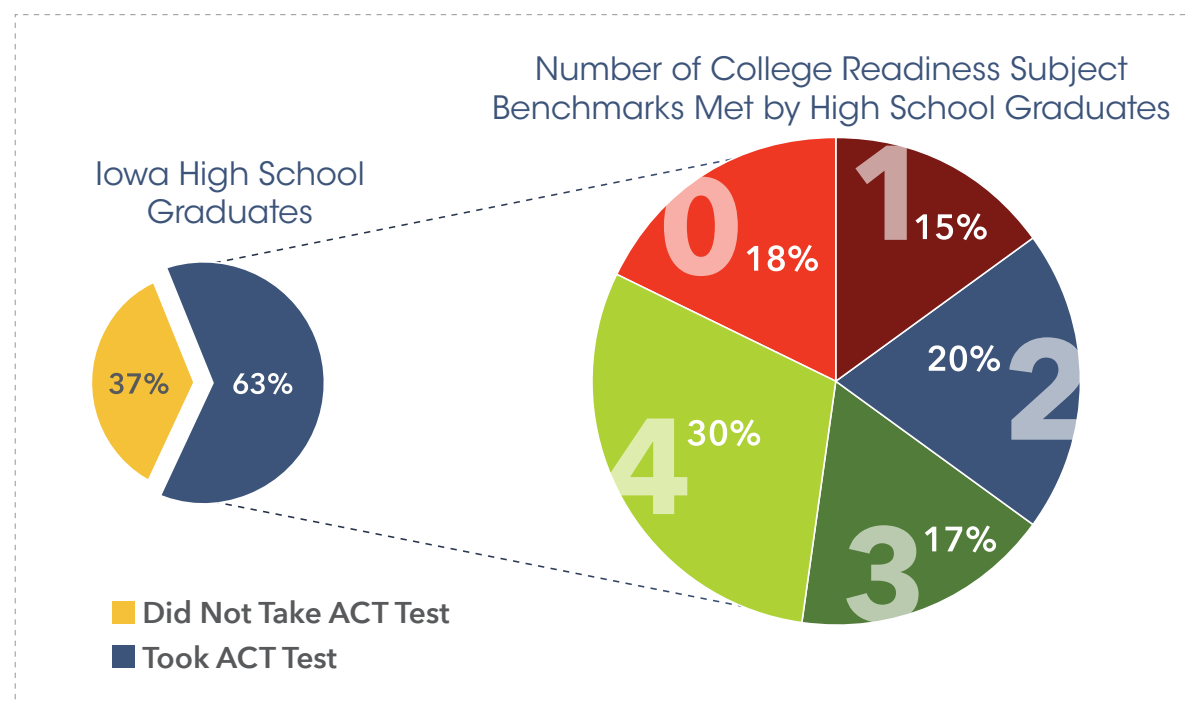
America still leads the world in quality higher education. Students from every country flock to our colleges and universities for the research and learning opportunities they provide.

As the competition to get into these colleges becomes more fierce, Iowa students are less prepared than ever to compete with their American and international counterparts getting into our great colleges and universities. A significant number of our high school graduates are not ready for college or vocational school and require remedial coursework.

Lack of college preparedness also impacts our students when they enter the workforce. Iowa business leaders struggle to find enough qualified job candidates within the borders of Iowa. They are forced to import talent from other states to fill many of their skilled jobs.

According to ACT preparedness numbers--less than half of our children are college ready in at least three core subjects. Nearly twenty percent of our high school graduates are not college ready in any subjects.

### ACT College Readiness



Source: ACT: The Condition of College & Career Readiness, 2012

Excellence in public education requires a renewed commitment by Iowans.

Hundreds of conversations with key stakeholders have shaped our beliefs. We've talked with Iowa teachers, parents, administrators, collegiate educators, business leaders, legislators, and policymakers, along with national leaders in education, including many representatives of other states.

While restoring our leadership position will take transformative change and many years of hard work, there is good news. We believe that the journey back to a position of leadership is imminently achievable. Other states have faced a similar challenge and have achieved great success. States such as Colorado, Florida and our neighbor to the north, Minnesota have seen dramatic improvements in student achievement over the last twenty years. We've worked to understand the common elements of success and, more importantly, how those principles could be applied in Iowa.

We believe that the following four steps will have the greatest impact on student achievement in the near and intermediate term.

#### We must:

- Develop Accountability
- Attract and Retain the Best Teachers
- Support our Educators with Professional Development
- Provide Choice and Options for Students and Parents

“The higher goal a person pursues, the quicker his ability develops, and the more beneficial he will become to the society. I believe for sure that this is also a truth.”

- Maksim Gorky

“What nobler employment, or more valuable to the state than that of the [person] who instructs the rising generation.”

- Cicero

Develop Accountability

The Goal

In order to have accountability, you need two things - a goal and a way to measure progress.

If we want to improve student achievement, we must raise our expectations of what we expect children to learn. Iowa has taken an important step in this regard: adoption of the Common Core State Standards and incorporating them into the Iowa Core. The Iowa Core is a rigorous set of standards that has been developed to ensure that our students are college or career ready when they graduate from high school. In a nutshell, they will be ready to compete with those from other states and countries. The Iowa Core will be implemented over the next several years and will provide the challenging academic expectations that our children deserve.

Periodically Measuring Progress

The objective of our public schools is to educate our children. That’s why it is ironic that in Iowa today, we don’t measure how much our children learn each school year. It is a concept called **Annual Academic Growth**, and it is the key metric to measure whether each child is on track to be college or career ready by the time graduation arrives. It is also the key performance measure that allows us to understand how well our public education school is serving our children. Today our assessment tests don’t allow us to understand how much students learned in the last year, we just get a snapshot of what they know at a moment in time.

We should adopt Annual Academic Growth as our key measure of success.

So what will it take to develop this measure? First, our assessment tests must cover the same material that we expect children to learn. Teachers rightly ask the question “should I teach to the test or should I teach to the curriculum?” Those should be one and the same. Second, our annual assessments need to be administered at the end of the school year so Annual Academic Growth can be attributed to a given school year. Today each school district can decide when to test students. We wouldn’t ask a student to take final exams at the beginning or middle of the year, nor should we do our assessments then.

Attract and Retain the Best Teachers



Cicero understood the importance of teachers more than 2,000 years ago. All the marvels of human history can be traced to teaching and the advancement of knowledge. But how do we attract the best?

Provide broader access to the teaching profession

While the traditional path - those who receive their college degrees in education - will always provide the vast majority of our teachers, we should cast our net broadly so that our administrators have the deepest talent pool possible from which to hire.

One way to do that is to provide alternative pathways to receive a teaching license. Iowa has one of the most stringent licensure requirements for non-traditional candidates. The result is that we miss out on many outstanding individuals who would be great teachers. One example is Teach for America, an organization that has provided a strong group of teachers for schools in low-income neighborhoods across the country. We need to develop partnerships with organizations like Teach for America so that school administrators have the option of tapping into additional sources of great teachers.

Increase compensation levels for teachers and provide incentives to enter the education field

In Iowa, a great education starts with a great teacher. Attracting and retaining the best must be a top priority. Iowa currently ranks 26th nationally in teacher pay. Among our Midwest neighbors, we rank 7th out of 12 states.

If we want top tier results from our teachers, then our compensation must reflect that aim. In addition to higher salaries, we should provide upfront incentives like tuition reimbursement to encourage talented individuals to enter the profession.

“Teaching is not a lost art, but the regard for it is a lost tradition.”

– Jacques Barzun

### Support our Educators with Professional Development



Teaching is one of the most important roles in our society. Our educators should be viewed with the same professional regard as those in medicine, law, accounting or engineering. It stands to reason that we should be supporting our educators with the same level of professional development that we do in other fields

Great teachers understand that teaching is more art than science. It requires the ability to apply skills to the development of each individual child. Teachers need to be exposed to new educational techniques and how technology can improve the learning experience in the classroom. One way to support our educators is to offer tuition reimbursement for those who enhance their skills.

We also need to support our principals and administrators with professional development opportunities. Studies have shown that the single biggest determinant of the success of a school is the leadership ability of the school principal.

“A hundred years from now, it will not matter what kind of car I drove, what kind of house I lived in, how much money I had in the bank...but the world may be a better place because I made a difference in the life of a child.”

– Forest Witcraft

### Provide Choice and Options for Students and Parents

No parent should be forced to send their child to school that isn't effective at educating children. Parents deserve choices in areas where our population density supports it. Open enrollment programs are one way to achieve choice. Charter schools are another alternative. To date, charter schools have not been successful in Iowa. Yet this is not the case in many other states, particularly those showing significant gains in student achievement over the last twenty years.

Of the five states showing the largest gains in student achievement, charter schools represent 6.6% of total schools. While traditional schools will always educate a large majority of our children, choice and options can improve our overall results.

In order for Iowa to develop a successful charter school environment, we need to modify our charter laws so that state funding follows each child.





### What Can You Do?

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#### 1. Get Engaged in Education Reform

The ultimate responsibility for our education system falls on us, the citizens of the State of Iowa. It is our obligation to understand how well we are serving our children on a statewide basis as well as in each of our respective school districts.

We need a greater understanding of the crisis facing our children. Talk to your neighbors and your local educators. Ask them what they think about our public education system - and what we can do to better serve our children and restore our position of national leadership.

#### 2. Stay Informed

Visit our website, [www.reachinghigheriowa.org](http://www.reachinghigheriowa.org), and sign up for our email list. We will keep you posted on important developments relating to education reform in Iowa.

#### 3. Advocate for Change

Contact your legislators and tell them you strongly support efforts to improve public education in Iowa.





[reachinghigheriowa.org](http://reachinghigheriowa.org)