I was pleased to see Tim Swarens' Oct. 26 column making the point that education reform in Indiana needs a conversation not confrontation. That conversation should start with an honest assessment of the impact of reform efforts to date.

Over the last decade, teacher salaries in constant dollars in Indiana have decreased by more than 10 percent. Outpaced only by North Carolina, which experienced teacher salary decreases of 14 percent, Indiana had the second largest decrease in the country.

More than $300 million were taken out of Indiana public schools during the Great Recession and millions more have been diverted from traditional public schools to charters and increasingly to private and religious schools through vouchers. At the same time, Indiana has implemented numerous ill-informed policies that discourage teachers from pursuing higher levels of education, promote merit pay based largely on unreliable test-based evaluation methods, lower standards for teacher licensure, and generally promote de-professionalization of teaching.

Whether these are the intended or unintended results of efforts by groups such as the American Legislative Exchange Council that promote model legislation and lobby at the state and federal levels or that of other reform-minded groups and individuals who believe change is needed at the local level to improve schools, the consequences for public education have been disastrous. The only clear winners so far are the test companies making billions of dollars in profit from the standardized test accountability craze in an experiment never before tried anywhere in the world, especially not in countries that have attained the highest levels of achievement in international comparisons of student performance.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, himself an early proponent of standardized test accountability, recently said, "I believe testing issues today are sucking the oxygen out of the room in a lot of schools..."

It is time for Americans, including Hoosiers, to understand that economic and public policies that undermine public education and teaching as a profession will have long-term negative consequences on America's economic competitiveness and, importantly, on our democratic way of life.

In Indiana, enrollment in teacher education programs has decreased by more than 30 percent over the last decade, and the rate of decrease recently has accelerated. Indiana is not unique in experiencing a drop in teacher education enrollment fueled by disinvestment in public education and contentious public policies that discourage talented students from going into teaching as well as encourage experienced teachers to leave the field. It is happening nationwide.

California, Texas and other large states already are having significant teacher shortages as a result of the decreasing interest in education among the people we need most to improve our schools. Who can blame our teachers when the exchange for a lifelong commitment to the "noble profession" is lower pay, more ill-conceived accountability and blame for society's failures?

If Indiana continues down the "education reform" path, Hoosiers will soon face the same problems bigger states are already experiencing. The research is incontrovertible that regardless of the type of institution a student attends, the single most important school-based factor for improving student achievement is the quality of the classroom teachers and school leaders.

In current reform terminology, we must invest to "turn around" the trends in teacher pay in Indiana, recruit the best and brightest into teaching, raise professional standards for teacher and school leader preparation, provide teacher professional development, design better and more reliable accountability systems, and otherwise support real, research-based education reform. Anything less will just lead to more failed, ideologically driven "reform" and empty rhetoric about education improvement.

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School reform pushing potential teachers away from profession
IndyStar 2:55 p.m. EST November 7, 2014