



Commissioner's Report
Interim Commissioner Kevin C. Brown

Dear Kentucky Board of Education members:

Thank you for your commitment to racial equity in Kentucky's public schools. The July 10 resolution set forth the vision of the KBE to "ensure that each student is empowered and equipped with the knowledge and skills to be successful in a complex and competitive world." The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) agrees that it is "vitally important that we make sure every school district across Kentucky, every student and every educator has access to this training and these opportunities." The department appreciates the board's call to have a laser-focus to explore training and resources for Kentucky's students, teachers and school leaders.

To date, the KDE has:

- Created a cross-agency Trauma and Resilience Team, in partnership with colleagues from the Kentucky Department for Behavioral Health, Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities.
- Released [*How Districts Can Facilitate Conversations About Race-based Stress and Trauma*](#) on June 3, 2020. This document serves to help districts facilitate conversations about race-based stress and trauma. It comes as we are seeing an outcry of grief and anger across the nation with many of our students, families and staff speaking out about racial injustice.
- Contracted with the Kentucky State University (KSU) Center for Research on the Eradication of Education Disparities (CREED) to partner with the KDE and other stakeholders to provide educator training to address educational disparities between student groups. This includes training for KDE staff and will expand to work directly with schools and districts that are working to implement high quality multi-tiered systems of support, Positive Behavior Intervention Systems and trauma-informed practices. The training materials will incorporate culturally responsive practices.

Implicit bias training for KDE staff began at the July 22 Team KDE meeting. Dr. Roger Cleveland from the CREED worked with staff to explore why conversations around implicit bias are needed, how implicit bias is defined and why we should all reflect on our own behaviors to identify implicit bias. Dr. Cleveland concluded his presentation with suggestions for additional conversations and learning necessary for KDE staff. In the upcoming months, the KDE will continue the work toward further identifying the implicit bias that affects our understanding, actions and decisions. As Dr. Cleveland referenced in the Team KDE session, it is critical that staff focus on policies, practices, programs and processes we use to de-bias. Through education, exposure and approach, we can combat implicit bias.

This work continues our emphasis on ensuring racial equity that was highlighted in the July 10 KBE resolution. The resolution will serve as a North Star document that will guide the board's work and the work of the department. It not only reaffirms the board's commitment to racial



equity in public schools, but charges us to create a better educational community for all students, and importantly, for Black students and other students of color.

Our work on providing schools and districts the items they need to reopen continues. So far, the agency has produced [18 guidance documents](#) ranging from career and technical education and food service to the health and safety of staff and how to meet the academic needs of students. We announced at the Special Superintendents' Webcast on Tuesday [First Lady Brittainy Beshear's Coverings for Kids campaign](#), which is designed to help support our public schools by giving people a way to donate face masks for students and staff. KDE staff members also had a meeting with the Commissioner's Student Advisory Council Wednesday to help come up with ways to promote face mask wearing on social media.

As you know, this is my last regular KBE meeting as interim commissioner. It's been an honor to work with you and KDE staff during these trying times. I must admit, I've not had much sleep during the past eight months, but it's been important work and I am glad to have had the opportunity to serve you and the 650,000 public school children in the Commonwealth.

I know you have heard me say this time and again, but I want to stress that it's not me who has been responsible for the vast majority of work that this department has put out since March to help guide and inform our districts. The staff here at the KDE has worked tirelessly to make sure schools and districts had what they need to keep kids learning early on, and now to provide guidance for reopening for the 2020-2021 school year. There have been a seemingly endless number of webcasts, phone calls, Teams meetings, guidance documents and press releases coming from the department. It truly is Team KDE here and it has been an honor to work alongside them.

As I committed to you upon the approval of incoming commissioner Dr. Jason Glass' contract, I will continue to do whatever is needed to ensure that Jason's transition to the KDE is as seamless as possible. Dr. Glass has been attending the weekly Executive Leadership meetings engaging around the topics on the agenda and answering questions about his vision, priorities (including equity), and being intentional about the focus of KDE support. He also "surprised" staff by joining sessions like the Team KDE meeting and Conversations with the Commissioner recently. We look forward to continued discussions until he arrives permanently here at the Sower building. Dr. Glass' office is ready and waiting for him to officially start on September 14.

I also want to leave you with some final thoughts of concern. At the June regular board meeting, the Office of Finance and Operations (OFO) gave a presentation to communicate concerns regarding the challenging fiscal environment that both the KDE and local districts currently face. This was going to be a challenging year for local school districts and the KDE even before the addition of COVID-19 and necessary expenses associated with increases in sanitization and new models of instruction, food service and transportation.

At this time, funds to support local school districts are scarce.



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- While the budget maintained a \$4,000 SEEK per pupil amount, which is the highest it has been, this amount has not kept with up with the bare minimum of inflationary increases.
- Schools are continuing to suffer from program budget reductions or eliminations from the 2018 budget, which has carried over to the current budget and includes the elimination of funding for professional development for teachers and administrators, instructional resource dollars, Commonwealth School Improvement Funds, teacher induction programs and minority recruitment and retention.
- KETS funds are at an all-time low since FY 2006 at \$15.4 million (with remote learning/technology needed more than ever).
- While funds have been reduced, additional statutory mandates continue to be imposed upon the KDE and districts without adequate funding (standards development, ACT testing, industry certification payment, etc.)
- The Kentucky School for the Blind and Kentucky School for the Deaf struggle with operational costs. Their operational funding has been stagnant since FY 2008. They, unlike local school districts, have no independent taxing authority and are largely reliant upon state appropriations. Costs continue to rise, including utilities and necessary instructional supports such as interpreters and orientation and mobility staff.
- Area technology centers are functioning with minimal operating funds, making it difficult to mimic their operations and supplies with business environments to give students the best chance at obtaining valuable industry certifications.
- Local districts will face fiscal uncertainty at that local level due to the overall depressed economic environment associated with business closures and inability for Kentuckians to pay property-related taxes. The impact of property assessments are not yet known, nor will districts have any precedent to anticipate what collection of revenues may look like.

Additionally, the KDE faces its own set of fiscal challenges:

- Reductions in the KDE workforce and increases in retirement costs have impacted the volume of support for districts.
- Budget reductions across state government are likely to occur in the first part of FY 2021.
- Depending upon the amount, the KDE likely will no longer be able to absorb all reductions, which would result in reductions that would directly impact districts.
- \$1.38 million in state funding that was used to support nationally recognized comprehensive school improvement efforts was eliminated since FY 2018. A model program to support schools has been reduced to meet minimum federal assistance requirements.

Furthermore, CARES Act funds and possible FEMA reimbursement are not likely to cover additional expenses to districts. Uncertainty of the length of the national emergency is contributing to the inability to quantify how much exactly is needed. However, the Council of Chief State School Officers estimated that \$158 billion-\$255 billion in additional funding will be needed to reopen schools and safely serve students this upcoming school year.

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As you look to the start of the new school year and a new commissioner of education, I challenge you to continue to push forward with the progress Kentucky has made rather than trying to maintain the status quo due to the significant challenges education will face in the current and coming fiscal year. We owe the Commonwealth's children to continue finding ways to improve the system that prepares them for their future, regardless of the challenges.

While the KDE has managed to push forward with previous budget cuts, I also urge you to continue to build public and legislative support for Kentucky's public schools. Sufficient funding is critical to continue supporting our schools and districts at the levels they need to support the Commonwealth's children. Any flexibility in our budget is no longer possible and continued decreases in funding will hurt deeply at both the state and local level. Now is the time to be bold and push forward, united in our vision to provide all of Kentucky's children with the high-quality education they need and deserve.

Sincerely,

Kevin C. Brown



The KDE Welcomes New Staff

New staff who joined the KDE since the board's June regular meeting are listed below by office:

Office of the Commissioner

6/16/20, James (Jim) Gaines, Division of Communications

Office of Finance and Operations

6/16/2020, Renee Tabor, OFO/School and Community Nutrition/Child and Adult Care/CACFP Programmatic Delivery Section

6/16/2020 Rebecca Shepherd Smith, OFO/School and Community Nutrition/Schools/Programmatic Delivery Section

7/16/2020 Morgan Rousseau, OFO/School and Community Nutrition/Child and Adult Care/CACFP Programmatic Delivery Section

7/16/2020 Tiffany Yeast, OFO/Resource Management/Payroll and Benefits Branch

Office of Education Technology

6/1/2020, Manoj Chaudhary, OET/School Technology Services

7/1/2020 Brittany Coldiron, OET/School Technology Services

Office of Continuous Improvement and Support

7/1/2020 Sarah Snipes, OCIS/Innovation

7/15/2020 Blake Konny, OCIS/Student Success / Safe and Supportive Schools

7/15/2020 Michelle Nichols, OCIS/Student Success/Student Engagement and Support

Office of Legal Services

6/16/20 Melissa Moore, Executive Administrative Secretary

Office of Special Education and Early Learning

6/16/2020, Taysha Oglesby, OSEEL/IDEA Implementation and Preschool/School Readiness

Kentucky School for the Blind and Kentucky School for the Deaf Updates

Kentucky School for the Blind (KSB)

The KSB held a virtual math and science camp for elementary and middle school students who are visually impaired from across the state. Nine elementary students and nine middle school students attended the two-week camp. By all accounts, the camp was a great success.

Peggy Sinclair-Morris was hired as the new KSB principal, effective July 1, 2020. Ms. Sinclair-Morris has experience in the field of visual impairment for over 30 years as a teacher of the visually impaired, orientation and mobility specialist, director of outreach at the KSB and an educational specialist for the Kentucky Deaf Blind Project and Virginia Project for Children with



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Deaf blindness. She is certified as a director of special education, teacher of the Deaf and hard of hearing, teacher of the visually impaired and is working on her Educational Leadership certification through Northern Kentucky University. Ms. Sinclair-Morris is excited and honored to be back in the fold of the KSB family.

The KSB continues to plan for the reopening of school. Staff are in the midst of planning to ensure the safety of students and staff through mask wearing, hand washing, social distancing, temperature taking, and extra rounds of sanitizing and cleaning. The KSB in Louisville and KSD in Danville will begin classes Aug. 24, but will offer their first six weeks through non-traditional instruction (NTI) only, as announced on July 27.

Utilizing Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds available under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, Economic Security (CARES) Act, the KSB will provide live, virtual instruction through a learning management system, known as Canvas, and will provide each student with a fully accessible device to access the system. Staff are investigating the use of hotspots for students who do not have internet access in their homes.

The KSB also held its annual Gateways Conference this July. This is a professional development conference for all teachers and service providers who serve children who have a visual impairment. The event was held virtually and spanned two days. Approximately 150 people from three different states registered for the event.

The KSB recently conducted family surveys regarding NTI and returning to school. Thirty-one percent of families replied that had a low or very low comfort level about their child returning to school. Forty-eight percent reported a high or very high comfort level about their child returning to school. Concerning KSB's implementation of NTI last spring, 55% of families were satisfied or very satisfied with the experience and the instruction their child received, while 17% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Families reporting they were not satisfied with NTI stated concerns with feeling overwhelmed when trying to assist their child and asked teachers to use the same online platform. The KSB is addressing this concern by selecting one platform to utilize in the future.

Kentucky School for the Deaf (KSD)

KSD staff made two deliveries of classroom supplies and NTI packets to every student in April and May. The student visits were also an opportunity for staff to assess students' emotional health. Because many of our families do not know American Sign Language (ASL), some students experience language deprivation which causes feelings of loneliness and isolation. Leadership was able to identify some students who needed additional mental health supports during COVID-19 closure.

The KSD utilized a daily virtual "roll call" as a strategy to collectively assess instructional approaches that were and were not effective for teaching and learning. This was also a forum for



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staff to share celebrations and frustrations of working on platforms that were not deaf friendly. Despite additional supports, some students struggled with virtual classrooms and refused to engage and complete assignments. The majority of these students were high performing students pre-NTI.

Families were surveyed in May asking for their feedback on NTI. Survey results indicated families were very satisfied with NTI. Some families indicated a desire to learn ASL to better support their child, and some communicated they lacked adequate internet connections. The survey also asked families what they needed in the fall if NTI was necessary. KSD staff used this information to refine virtual learning and supports.

The KSD is working to purchase hot spot devices for families who do not have access to adequate internet connectivity. One refinement to NTI moving forward, based on feedback from families, is to have one teacher as the primary contact for a family to relay information or address questions and concerns. This is a change from the spring when multiple teachers were following up with a family.

KSD Leadership is actively working with other Deaf schools to exchange strategies and plans to best meet the needs of students. KSD staff participated in weekly superintendent calls and met with state and local health officials to plan for the reopening of the campus, including dorms to ensure Healthy at Work and Healthy at School guidance is being implemented with fidelity. Calendars for July, August and September start dates have been developed using both campus and remote learning as options for KSD families. As is the case with the KSB, the KSD will begin classes Aug. 24, but will offer its first six weeks through non-traditional instruction (NTI) only.

In preparation of in-person classes, clear masks were secured for students and staff to use as this type allows for improved communication using ASL. Based on health department guidance, all dorm students will be assigned one to a room instead of the typical two students per room. For students not returning to campus, staff are working on strategies to incorporate social and emotional supports into daily instruction and dedicated time for students to socialize with each other. Dorm staff will have evening ASL story time for families, ASL classes for families and telehealth for all related services. The mental health team will utilize on-site visits for students of concern.

Parents will be surveyed again late summer to assess the number of students planning to return to campus to ensure full preparation to keep students and staff safe and healthy.

Kentucky Tech District of Area Technology Centers Updates

Many of the Area Technology Center (ATC) principals are facilitating regional program-specific professional learning communities (PLCs) to help create problem-based learning (PBL) plans

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and share remote learning ideas, resources and tools. The entire Kentucky Tech district recently completed PBLWorks training for principals and lead teachers within all ATCs. Teachers and principals worked together to create PBL plans that can be implemented during remote learning. The facilitators shared many virtual tools throughout the three-day trainings that can be used to enhance remote learning.

ATC leadership completed virtual principal meetings and professional development during the week of July 27 in preparation for the reopening of ATCs in the fall. ATC administrators are working diligently with sending districts to ensure that schools are meeting student needs while adhering to state and sending district opening guidance.