

OP ED by Terry Holliday, Kentucky Education Commissioner

The State of Kentucky Education

I was heartened by Gov. Steve Beshear's State of the Commonwealth speech, and his strong commitment to the future of Kentucky's children. He has consistently supported education, even in difficult economic times, and I am grateful he continues to place such a critical focus on the children of this commonwealth.

I do not take the governor's support and commitment to education lightly. That is why we are working diligently to ensure ALL Kentucky's students are college/career-ready when they graduate high school. It is an economic imperative not only for our students but also for our state.

Over the past year, Kentucky has undertaken a number of initiatives and realized some major achievements that underscore our efforts:

- **Improved readiness** – We made major strides toward our goal of college/career-readiness for all students. The percentage of students who graduated college and career ready jumped from 38 percent to 47 percent in a single year – that translates to more than 4,500 students with a better opportunity to be successful after high school.
- **Gains in achievement** – Kentucky students showed steady progress on major national tests such as EXPLORE, PLAN and ACT, in many cases scoring above the national average for the first time. More Kentucky students are taking challenging Advanced Placement courses and scoring higher on tests. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress 8th-grade science test, Kentucky students significantly outperformed their peers nationally. According to a report from Harvard University,

Kentucky is tied for fifth place nationwide in the improvement of its students' performance in assessments of reading, mathematics and science since 1992.

- **School Report Card** – This new online tool allows all Kentucky citizens to easily see how their school or district measures up against others. It provides detailed information on accountability, assessments, school safety, and more. It also provides graphs showing actual performance against annual improvement targets in the areas of proficiency, gap and college/career-readiness. All this data is available at www.education.ky.gov and will equip parents, businesses and communities with information to ask tough questions and demand excellence of their schools and district.
- **No Child Left Behind/ESEA waiver** – In February 2012, Kentucky was among the first states granted flexibility from some of the requirements of the No Child Left Behind/Elementary and Secondary Education Act. While we are still focused on proficiency, closing achievement gaps, increasing graduation rates and annual progress, the waiver allows funding flexibility and for the state to use a single comprehensive method – the Unbridled Learning: College/Career Readiness for All Accountability System -- to determine whether students, schools and districts are meeting state and federal goals.
- **Districts of Innovation** – HB 37 (2012) allows Kentucky public school districts exemptions from certain regulations and policies in exchange for them creating new, innovative learning environments. By re-thinking what a school might look like, districts will be able to redesign student learning to engage and motivate more students and increase the numbers of students who are college and career ready. KDE will begin accepting applications from districts this spring.

We have made great strides this past year, as we worked to transform our schools into vibrant, engaging and innovative places that equip Kentucky's children with the deeper knowledge, stronger critical thinking skills and the entrepreneurial spirit they need to succeed in a 21st-century world. But our work is far from done.

- This year we will be implementing a statewide kindergarten readiness screener that will give teachers valuable information they can use to meet student needs and maximize learning from the first day of school.
- Next-generation science and social studies standards that promote 21st-century skills are on the horizon in 2013. And we must remain steadfast in our support of common core standards in English/language arts and mathematics knowing that short-term setbacks in scores will yield more competitive students in the years to come.
- We will continue working to raise student proficiency rates and close achievement gaps between all student groups. While not quite half of our lowest performing schools are showing progress, we must find answers and implement solutions to put those that aren't on the path to improvement.
- This fall we will be piloting a statewide Professional Growth and Effectiveness System designed to provide educators the meaningful feedback and tools they need to improve their practice and impact student learning in a positive way. This is a critical piece in our overall strategy to advance education in Kentucky.

We have our work cut out for us. Based on the progress I have seen and the efforts I have witnessed as I visit classrooms around this state, however, I remain confident Kentucky educators are up to the task.

Kentucky has made tremendous progress in education in the past several years. Yet, as the governor noted during his speech, 88 percent of Kentucky students attend schools in districts where per pupil spending is below the national average. I, too, share Gov. Beshear's sense of concern and urgency regarding the need for additional K-12 funding and will continue to encourage Kentucky lawmakers to identify additional revenues for our schools and educational efforts.

The state of education in Kentucky is certain. Our focus and commitment to prepare Kentucky's children for the future does not waver – it remains stronger than ever.

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Kentucky Education Commissioner

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