



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
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NOTE: This posting was originally published in October 2011. It is being posted again in honor of the holiday recognizing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday.

Closing the Achievement Gap

Last Sunday as I was returning from the airport, I listened to the CNN [coverage](#) of the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial dedication. I listened to President Barack Obama's [remarks](#) as part of the dedication ceremony, and I listened to the entire "[I Have a Dream](#)" speech played as part of the dedication.

I could not help but reflect on the past 50 years. As a student in a segregated school until 10th grade, I can vividly remember the activities around integration in our local school system. Then as a college student, I recall traveling with the Furman University band in Washington, D.C. during the riots in the late 1960s. Then as a teacher, I recall the integration of the Gaffney, South Carolina schools and the student walkouts and near-riots related to forced integration.

Throughout my 40-year education career, I have watched our nation and our schools struggle with issues related to integration and helping all children succeed. Our nation began the path toward equity with the *Brown v. Board of Education* [case](#). One of the cases that was combined into the *Brown* case came from a school district in South Carolina (Clarendon 3). I visited that school district as part of a team assigned to support the school district in the 1990s. I was saddened to see that not much had changed. The system was still segregated. The public schools were almost 100 percent minority, and white parents sent their students to private academies. The local board was still controlled by local land owners who would not support raising taxes to adequately fund the needs of students.

This system and others were highlighted in a documentary that aired a few years ago called [Corridor of Shame](#). President Obama even highlighted a student who had written about the need for improved schools in this area, and if my memory is correct, there were substantial changes to the school where she attended in a Dillon, South Carolina district.

All of this reflection comes back to a couple of core questions – are we providing equity in access and outcomes for ALL children? Have we closed achievement gaps? These are questions that certainly have clear answers based on the data across the nation and across Kentucky.

Look carefully at the achievement gap data in your school and school district. Look carefully at the suspension and discipline rates for minority students in your schools. Look carefully at the percentage of minority students that graduate from high school that are college/career ready, attend postsecondary and graduate from postsecondary. How many minority teachers, principals, superintendents and board members serve in our local school districts?

Almost two years ago, I revitalized the Commissioners Raising Achievement and Closing Gaps Council ([CRACGC](#)). This council recently published [recommendations](#) to ensure equity in access and outcomes. The recommendations from the council will become a required component for a new group of schools and districts that will be identified as part of our No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waiver request.

This new group of schools will be called “focus schools.” The Kentucky Department of Education will identify those schools that have the largest achievement gaps. These schools will be required to address achievement gap issues through school and district plans. Targeted interventions will increase with each year that the school or district does not meet targets to close achievement gaps.

My biggest fear is that, even with our best efforts through state accountability, a commissioner of education will be writing an article in another 40 years documenting that not much progress has been made ensuring equity of access and outcomes for ALL children.

What will the collective WE do differently over the next 5-10 years? The collective WE must involve communities in addressing poverty and access. The collective WE must address early childhood education, since that is where the gap can best be closed. The collective WE must address jobs and hope in our most challenged communities.

We cannot rely solely on teachers and schools to make a difference (we tried that with No Child Left Behind). We cannot mandate equity. Equity must be a belief that a community holds dear and then takes action to accomplish.

You are part of the collective WE. What will YOU do?

Terry Holliday, Ph.D.