



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
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“Quality Counts” and Tough Fiscal Realities

Gov. Steve Beshear’s budget proposal for the next two fiscal years contains both bright spots and harsh realities for Kentucky’s public schools. The primary source of state funding – SEEK – would not be cut, but it also will not increase to parallel enrollment growth. The governor’s proposal calls for expanding preschool funding, but school systems would see decreases in other program-area funding.

You can see Gov. Beshear’s budget proposal at <http://www.osbd.ky.gov/>.

As we steel ourselves for probable funding cuts and shortfalls, it was incredibly heartening last week to receive some positive news in the form of *Education Week’s* “Quality Counts” issue.

The annual report, which grades all states on key education indicators, showed Kentucky making its highest overall score in the past five years, earning a C+ with 78.6 points (U.S. average, 76.3) and making a dramatic jump in ranking from 24th to 14th overall. Access the full report [here](#).

Education Week uses six indicators to rate a state’s education performance: Chance for Success; K-12 Achievement; Standards/Assessments and Accountability; Transitions and Alignment; Teaching Profession; and School Finance.

As the following highlights show, Kentucky fared well in four out of the six areas, with letter grades above or near the national average:

- A- (ranked 20) for standards, assessments and accountability, compared with the average state score of B
- B- (ranked 5th) for teaching profession, compared with the average state score of C
- B- (ranked 14th) for transitions and alignment, compared with the average state score of C+
- In K-12 achievement, Kentucky scored on par with the average state score of C-, ranking 13th.

The grades and rankings are a testament to our hard-working teachers, administrators, community members and elected officials. But a great deal of the credit also is due to 2009’s

Senate Bill 1 (SB 1), which led us to undertake an overhaul of our standards, assessment and accountability system and increase our focus on college/career readiness for ALL Kentucky students.

This legislation set Kentucky on a course to become a leader nationwide, and with the support of Gov. Steve Beshear, legislators, teachers, administrators and parents, Kentucky's work in school accountability, teacher training, college/career readiness and stronger academic standards is moving us in the right direction.

Certainly, this report validates that. I know as we fully implement our new standards and assessment system, we will see even more positive changes in our schools and for our students.

Are we done yet? No. Not by a long shot.

As the "Quality Counts" shows, Kentucky lags behind when it comes to chances for success for Kentucky students. The state ranks 36th in that area. We recognize that is not where we need to be; it is the exact opposite of what SB 1 mandates – that ALL Kentucky children be prepared to succeed in college or careers.

As I reviewed the 2012 report, I saw some key areas that need improvement, so that in 2013 or 2014 we can celebrate placement in the top ten of all states on the "Quality Counts" report.

For example, Kentucky must improve its 8th-grade NAEP mathematics scores, its high school graduation rate and its Advanced Placement scores. We must reduce achievement gaps for low-income students. We must improve our teacher evaluation system, provide more rigorous training and offer incentives and resources to our classroom teachers. And, we must strengthen our per-pupil funding so that it is within 90 percent of the national average.

That is why it is critical that we move forward implementing the new standards and measures that have grown out of SB 1. Implementing these changes and having them take hold will take time, but we must continue to stay the course if we are to reverse historical underachievement.

I know implementing the requirements of SB 1 will be difficult at a time when we are seeing dwindling resources for instructional materials, Family Resource/Youth Services Centers (FRYSCs), extended school services, professional development and jobs. That is why I have been advocating at three-pronged approach that looks at productivity and efficiency; redirection of dollars; and a call for additional sources of revenue. Kentucky must implement strategies related to these items so that we can improve our standing nationwide.

At the same time, however, I do not want to lose sight of the gains we have made. We should take the time to note and celebrate them. It validates our decisions and work, and it gives us the strength as we move ahead to take on even greater challenges.

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