



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
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Solving an education conundrum

Recently, I attended a meeting at the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce to discuss a strategic plan for the Chamber and Kentucky. Kentucky Chamber CEO Dave Adkisson invited a group of “thought leaders” to hear a presentation from Ted Abernathy, who works with a number of local, state and national organizations to develop vision statements and strategic plans.

During his presentation, Abernathy discussed a number of trends that will impact Kentucky and the nation. One trend caught my attention due to the tremendous impact it is having on education in Kentucky. The trend is urbanization. Urbanization is basically the movement of individuals from rural and small city settings to midsize and large city settings. The key reason for urbanization appears to be the availability of jobs in urban settings and lack of jobs in rural settings.

Nationwide, the urbanization of America is evident. In 1950, more than 70 percent of the population lived in rural or small city settings. In 2010, that number dropped to 48 percent and the number is expected to drop to 40 percent by 2030. In 1950, 7 percent of the population lived in medium to large cities. In 2010, the number had grown to 20 percent and by 2030 at least 27 percent of our population is expected to live in medium to large cities. In a map that Mr. Abernathy shared, it was clear that the migration from rural to urban areas is happening all across Kentucky and the nation. It was interesting to discover that more than half of the U.S. population lives in just 146 counties.

What are the implications of urbanization for education in Kentucky? The obvious implication is that students are moving from rural settings to urban settings. Certainly, if we compare the 1950 census to the 2010 census we see evidence of this migration.

Students are moving because of job loss in rural settings. This is very evident in rural Eastern Kentucky communities. Many small communities that once relied heavily on the coal industry or agriculture for jobs have seen those jobs eliminated. The loss of jobs means the loss of tax revenue due to businesses being closed. When there are no jobs, people take their families to locations where there are jobs and in most cases, the jobs are located in or near urban settings. As families move away, the number of students attending schools shrinks.

The loss of student population means the loss of federal, state and local revenue for our schools. The loss of revenue means fewer teachers and fewer course offerings for students. The loss of revenue means less funding for teacher pay increases which means the gap between teacher availability in rural settings and urban settings will grow. This is especially evident when rural settings try to hire math, science, and special education teachers. The loss of revenue means less funding to build and maintain school facilities.

The loss of student population in our counties and small independent districts located in rural settings is well documented. When a local community has a small independent and a county system and both systems are losing students, then the communities begin to battle over student assignment agreements. When county and independent systems cannot come to agreement on student assignment agreements, then the

commissioner and eventually the Kentucky Board of Education get involved. It is always best when local communities resolve these issues prior to state involvement.

What are the possible solutions? Our normal solution in the past has been to push for more education. However, this creates a conundrum. If we educate more students to higher levels, then those with more education will seek better paying jobs and when no jobs are available, the talent will leave for areas that have jobs.

A possible solution is beginning to emerge with the Saving Our Appalachian Region (SOAR) initiative that Governor Beshear and Rep. Hal Rogers have sponsored along with other state officials. The key question is how do we build the infrastructure in Kentucky to recruit business and industry to locate in rural areas so that talented and educated individuals can remain in their rural communities and build the future? Hopefully, SOAR will be successful so our local schools and districts can be successful. The alternatives are not very desirable for those communities.

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