



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
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A delicate balancing act

As a parent, it is always difficult balancing between supporting your children and monitoring their behaviors and actions, which in some cases may require a disciplinary follow through.

Teachers face a similar balancing act – supporting and nourishing students while also monitoring student behavior and academic performance.

Principals confront the challenge of supporting teachers, but also monitoring instruction and academic results of classroom teachers.

Superintendents and school boards experience the same balancing act with principals and school leadership.

And the Kentucky Department of Education also must address this same type of balancing act. We often question ourselves as to the right balance between supporting schools and districts and monitoring schools and districts. At this month's Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) [meeting](#), the balancing act was obvious with a number of issues.

The department has been working overtime to develop a more comprehensive system of supports for the schools and districts to help close achievement gaps. The department must identify those programs and practices that yield results for student groups who are currently not achieving at expected levels. The department also provided the KBE with revisions to the state accountability model this week that would address the monitoring and accountability of closing achievement gaps. This was a classic example of how a state agency and state board work to balance support and accountability.

Another issue that shows the balancing act is SB 97, which raises the dropout age to 18. Recently we celebrated the [news](#) that 100 percent of local school boards had voluntarily adopted a policy to raise the dropout age. Districts were provided with significant support through planning grants and best practice sites that will help them implement SB 97. In addition, the department is working to increase opportunities in career and technical education and provide implementation grants for promising practices that will help address student motivation and success for those students who are ages 16-18 and not currently engaged or motivated to complete high school.

The balancing act comes as the department attempts to address challenges from critics of SB 97. Critics raise concerns that local school districts will attempt to game the system by encouraging students to withdraw from school and enroll in home schools. Also, critics say the disciplinary incidents will increase. Another concern from critics is that students will be warehoused in alternative programs. The KBE and department cannot ignore these critics, so we must have monitoring and accountability strategies in place.

One such strategy will be the monitoring of the number of public school students who withdraw each year in favor of home schooling. As Commissioner, I certainly support parental choice. There are many excellent home school programs available to parents; however, there are many home school programs that do not provide an adequate education. At the KBE meeting this week, I asked that the department establish an annual reporting requirement to monitor the number of high school students who withdraw each year to attend a home school. This report will be important to address concerns of the critics of SB 97. The current number of students who withdraw and enroll in home school averages about 5,000 students per year. This is less than 1 percent of the total student population.

KDE will provide this report on an annual basis by district and high school. Should there be a significant increase in the percentage of high school students withdrawing from public school to attend home school, then we will work with our schools and districts to better understand the reasons behind the increase. In most cases, we will probably find that our districts need additional support with alternative programs, student support programs, and career and technical education. However, we must also be open to addressing any unethical behavior where students are encouraged to withdraw and attend a non-existent home school.

My expectation is that we will not discover any attempts to “game the system”; however, we would not be doing our due diligence as an agency if we did not monitor this issue. The balancing act is always difficult between believing that everyone will act in a student’s best interest versus acting to make the numbers and the institution look good. As Ronald Reagan so aptly stated – “trust but verify.”

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Education Commissioner