



# Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner  
Terry Holliday



February 13, 2015

*Kentucky Department of Education Chief of Staff Tommy Floyd is my guest blogger this week. He shares some of his experiences and thoughts on the implementation of the higher compulsory school attendance age and how its intent is on helping each and every child in Kentucky become successful.*

## **SB 97 implementation: one educator's thoughts**

I vividly remember the first high school dropout I encountered. He and I started kindergarten together. One day during our sophomore year, he told me that he was on his way to the office to meet his mom to sign out of school, not just for the day, but for good. As he walked out of the classroom, he almost seemed to apologize. I remember the profound impact this had on me. Not going to school was a foreign concept. My parents had always promoted the importance of an education. How could anyone even consider dropping out of school? Why did this boy's parents allow this? At age 16 and without a high school diploma, what would he do for the rest of his life? Looking back, this was one of those early life events that started me down the path to become an educator and dedicate my life to the students of Kentucky.

The next memorable dropout I encountered was as a high school principal. Mary was a sophomore and a straight A student. I was filled with angst when her mother told me that she needed Mary at home to help with their large family, and that Mary had spent "enough" time in school. No shortage of begging and pleading on my part seemed to make a difference. Papers were signed and Mary and I parted ways – both of us in tears.

For years, the subject of dropouts has been a sensitive one for me – it was when I was a principal, it was when I was a superintendent, and it continues to be today in my role as Chief of Staff at the Kentucky Department of Education. Whenever I hear about a student dropping out, I feel a sense of loss and sadness. I think about what the future could have been for the student if he or she had stayed in school.

When I talk with former students who dropped out, I often hear remorse and regret and some common reasons that led to their decision. I hear that a life event got in their way. They felt school was boring or seemed disconnected from what they wanted in a career. They were frustrated with an obvious lack of academic success that seemed to get worse with time. They felt that no one at school really cared about them. They often said that they didn't give up on themselves; they simply gave up on the process.

Senate Bill 97 raises the compulsory school attendance age from 16 to 18 in Kentucky. Its pending implementation has prompted some to focus on the expense and challenges that lie ahead for districts to keep Kentucky students in school another two years.

I offer a different perspective. I feel the law will be a success due to the people working in Kentucky schools and districts. There is a strong belief among today's Kentucky education leaders in doing whatever it takes for a student to be successful. This is evidenced by our recent increase in both the graduation rate and the college- and career-readiness rate. Clearly, Kentucky has become a national leader when it comes to meeting individual student needs.

Kentucky schools and districts are changing the way they offer education. They are asking tough questions about potential at-risk students much earlier. Flexible scheduling to accommodate family needs, strong mentoring support, after hours tutoring, home visitation programs, student advocates, teen parenting classes, Saturday sessions, apprenticeships, career cluster opportunities are but a few of the ways Kentucky schools and districts are intervening earlier to prevent students from falling behind and eventually dropping out.

One of the most exciting aspects of the work ahead is being promoted from within our schools and districts – the belief that our work is moving away from being about numbers to being about the success of individual kids.

In the *9 Building Blocks for a World-Class State Education System*, the National Center on Education and the Economy lays out multiple components that world leaders include in the development of their educational systems. Countries that lead the rankings in educational excellence provide more resources for at-risk students than for others and create clear gateways for students through a system based on global standards, with no dead ends. From what I see, the idea of no dead ends is already embraced in the majority of our schools and districts across the Commonwealth.

When I hear stories of a student dropping back into education, they have often done so because a team of public school educators have surrounded them with support and helped them realize the importance of education to the next life step in life – no excuses, no blame; just a commitment to find a way to make each student successful. As we move forward with the implementation of SB 97, I feel confident that superintendents, principals and staff will continue to develop new strategies to address the needs of every student and that educators will share those strategies with each other.

While some may choose to focus on the challenges and expenses ahead with the higher dropout age, I am betting on the people inside Kentucky schools and districts who will continue to ensure our work is never about numbers, but instead is about the success of each individual student in Kentucky.

Any takers?

Tommy Floyd, Ed.D.  
Chief of Staff  
Kentucky Department of Education