



# Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner  
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## In the Aftermath of Storms

As commissioner, I have a goal to visit all 174 Kentucky school districts. For a visit to “count,” I must visit a school and talk with principals and teachers. I find these visits to be extremely helpful to get feedback on the initiatives that we are implementing through our Unbridled Learning [model](#), school facilities, school budgets and challenges faced by teachers, schools and districts.

I have visited about 140 school districts and about 400 schools so far. Occasionally, I am able to highlight a school or district in my communication tools (Twitter, Facebook, blog, e-mails and Web page) and in communication with members of the General Assembly. Through this blog, I wanted to highlight a recent visit to Magoffin and Morgan County schools.

As I drove into West Liberty, I was immediately struck by the devastation. I drove up to West Liberty Elementary School, which was damaged by the recent tornado. The school sits on top of a hill, and I was able to look down on West Liberty. I can only describe what I saw as a scene of devastation. It looked like a nuclear bomb had been dropped in the community. Trees were snapped in half. Homes had been lifted off their slabs, and only the slabs were left. Every building had some damage. Either the roof was missing, or major damage to sections of the roof was apparent. The school was boarded up.

As I drove along the Mountain Parkway to Magoffin County, I did not see any damage until I got beside the schools. The Magoffin schools are located very close to the parkway. What I saw was very similar to West Liberty. I was not aware until I talked with local folks that there had been two major storms – the one in West Liberty and the one in Magoffin. Roofs were missing from schools. Trailers had been picked up by the storm and blown into parking lots. Debris was scattered for miles. As I drove through the business section of Salyersville, I saw devastation similar to Morgan County.

While the devastation was difficult to view, and it was hard to comprehend the impact on families and communities, I was uplifted by what I saw in the schools. Upon entering West Liberty Elementary, I saw the superintendent, school board members, principal, teachers, students and community members who exhibited a “can-do” spirit that can overcome any obstacle. The teachers and principal were all wearing t-shirts. On the front was “West Liberty Elementary – the Miracle on the Hill.” On the back was a remarkable statement: “We’re not just

surviving, we're thriving – expect the best.” In the face of unbelievable devastation of the school and community, this school exhibited the spirit of the entire community. We will not just survive, we will thrive.

In Magoffin County, I experienced the same can-do attitude I saw in Morgan. The high school and middle school principals began working within hours of the storm to develop a schedule so the middle school students could stay together in the high school. The graded school staff worked many hours to prepare an older building to accommodate all of the students so they would not have to be split.

In both counties, the superintendent, central office administrators, school board and communities are to be commended for pulling together to provide schools for children and help them return to some normalcy. Many of these children and teachers lost their homes; however, they do have the routine of school to help them cope with the challenges.

There are other school systems and counties that were impacted by those storms and previous storms. Our Kentucky Department of Education staff is to be commended for its support of these schools and districts. Within hours of the recent storms, our staff worked with local staff to assess the situation and offer support and guidance as they began the long-haul work of clean up, insurance settlements, attendance, FEMA requirements and long-term facility planning.

The long-term challenges for the counties impacted by the recent storms are numerous. Addressing facility needs for replacement and repair, addressing the economic impact due to loss of homes and business on the school budget, and addressing the long-term impact on the lives of students and teachers are just a few. Our entire state came together to support these counties in the short-term; however, we must now come together to continue to support these counties in the long term. Over coming months, it will become more clear as to what that support looks like, and I take it as one of my responsibilities as commissioner to keep these needs in front of key decision-makers in our state.

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