



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
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Volunteers in Schools

According to our Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) Kentucky working conditions survey [data](#), one of the most important components for successful schools is the engagement of parents and volunteers in supporting teachers and their schools. As we analyzed the data from low-performing schools and correlated student learning outcomes with parent and volunteer engagement, we found strong correlations between those outcomes and parent/volunteer engagement.

As I visit schools across Kentucky, I see volunteers working with students on reading and math skills. I see volunteers working with students and teachers on service projects. I see volunteers supporting classroom teachers with routine tasks. I see volunteer projects that save funds for school systems. During [Operation Preparation](#) in the spring of 2012, thousands of volunteers across Kentucky met with individual students to advise the students on what it takes to be on track for college and career readiness. Indeed, Kentucky has a culture of volunteerism in our schools that is second to none.

While volunteers are extremely important to improve learning outcomes for our schools, there is always a safety concern. There have been too many stories both in and out of education that reveal wrongdoing on the part of volunteers. That is why state law ([KRS 161.148](#)) requires local school boards to have policies in place that all volunteers who have contact with students should have a background check completed.

For many years, the Kentucky Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) has provided background checks at no cost for schools and districts. Recently, due to state budget cuts, the AOC has informed school districts that each background check will carry a \$10 cost, which is less than the normal \$20 cost.

School districts across Kentucky are very concerned about how to handle the costs, since in previous years there was no charge for background checks. Should the districts pass on the costs to parents and volunteers or absorb the costs in the school districts' budgets? Should the costs be handled by parent organizations? These are very difficult questions, and in most of the cases, I fear that volunteer and parent engagement will drop. This is exactly the wrong thing to happen when we are trying to help every child reach college and career readiness, which in turn will have a strong impact on the employment and economy of Kentucky.

I hope that our General Assembly is able to figure out the budget issues so this situation is a short-term problem. I know that the Governor's Commission on Tax Reform has started meeting, and the recommendations from this group could help improve the economy and funding for education.

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