



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
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Work yet to do

Kentucky has made remarkable progress in high school graduation rates and in the percentage of high school graduates who are college ready. High school graduation rates are among the best in the nation at 87.5 percent and our college/career-readiness rates have soared from 30 percent of graduates in 2009 to more than 62 percent in 2014.

While this is good news, there is much work yet to do.

Despite the improvement in college/career readiness, currently only 60 percent of high school graduates enroll in postsecondary programs. In some of our high schools that number is as high as 90 percent while in others it is less than 40 percent. However, back in 2012-13, more than 80 percent of students said they had plans to enroll in postsecondary when they graduated from high school.

Job number one is to find out why students who indicate an intent do not follow through and enroll in postsecondary. Is it the tuition rates? Is it a lack of support from families? Is it a lack of skills to complete the enrollment process or complete financial aid forms? Is it a lack of college scholarship funding from the Kentucky lottery?

Job number two is to make certain students who move on to postsecondary work are successful. We know that students who graduate from high school having reached the Kentucky college/career-readiness benchmarks realize more success their first year in college than those who are not college ready.

- They have a higher GPA – 2.6 versus 1.7 for those who are not college ready.
- They complete more college hours – 22 versus 11 for those who are not college ready.
- They will return for a second year of postsecondary at higher rates – 85 percent versus 65 percent for those who are not college ready.

It is clear that Kentucky's college/career-ready benchmarks are excellent indicators of success in postsecondary. I know our postsecondary institutions are working hard to build support systems for students who need additional support to reach success in their freshman year.

Job number three is to make certain students who move on to postsecondary are enrolled in career pathways that lead to jobs paying a living wage. Too many of our students who are graduating from postsecondary programs are finding that they have large student debt and very few job prospects in their chosen field of study. In some areas, unemployment of college graduates exceeds 20 percent and underemployment is higher than 40 percent.

Preparing students to make wise career choices begins in elementary school and continues through postsecondary. We should NEVER put students into programs that lead to a dead end. Our career pathways programs should always provide students with plenty of on ramps and off ramps as they move through the education system.

Job number four is for Kentucky to decide what type of economy we are willing to support. Recently, the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce released an [analysis of the workforce pipeline](#) in the Commonwealth. Less than 10 percent of employers think the workforce is prepared with the skills needed for the 21st century economy. Similar reports from the Southern Region Educational Board, Council of Chief State School Officers, National Governor's Association and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce have pointed to similar concerns about the workforce pipeline. While there are plenty of job openings, employers say it difficult to find employees with the skills needed for those openings. We have a huge skills gap in Kentucky and across this nation.

Kentucky must decide if we are going to invest in an education and workforce system that will prepare our citizens for the 21st century economy. The states that invest in K-12, career pathways, the workforce pipeline and postsecondary today will outcompete other states for jobs in the future. As Kentucky prepares to elect the next governor, these are critical questions to be asking.

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Education Commissioner