



# Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner  
Terry Holliday



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This week we had occasion to celebrate the progress we have made to date on raising the compulsory school attendance age to 18 in Kentucky. As of August 8, 120 districts had passed a policy under [Senate Bill 97](#) (2012) keeping students in school until they're 18 or graduate and completed the documentation process with the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE). At a luncheon for the [Graduate Kentucky](#) Coalition, KDE Associate Commissioner Susan Allred delivered the following message that I hope will resonate with our schools and districts, communities and lawmakers. I want to share it with you in my blog this week.

## **What now?**

*I have been asked to answer the question, "Senate Bill 97 has passed and we have the necessary districts (for statewide implementation no later than 2017), what now?"*

*First, an action of this proportion must be put into an historical perspective. Many years ago, I was a high school history teacher, but even before that I was inspired by great speeches and historical quotes. Two of my favorites seem appropriate today.*

*William Bradford, speaking in 1630 of the founding of the Plymouth Bay Colony, said that all great and honorable actions are accompanied with great difficulties, and both must be enterprised and overcome with answerable courage.*

*And in September of 1962, John Kennedy said while addressing a crowd at Rice University, "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard."*

*You have done an honorable thing. You have done a difficult thing. You have shown courage.*

*You have faced head-on the incredible fallacy of thinking that a 16-year old can drop out of school and be a productive citizen. You have faced this because you know that gainful employment rarely happens in this day and age without advanced training or knowledge. You have realized that businesses will not come to Kentucky unless they can find the educated workforce they need.*

*You have done the honorable thing by saying that a student should have a greater opportunity and more time to be successful. So, your boards of education have passed a policy that students will graduate and they will stay in your care until they are 18 or have that diploma.*

*Wow! What have you done? What now?*

*You see, now you are going to have students staying in school longer. But who are these students? What are their needs and how will we guide them into college- and career-readiness?*

*Some years ago, I was responsible for secondary education in a district of 3,900 students. The drop out age in that state was 16. Each year we had an average of 88 students leave school before they graduated.*

*One day, I decided to drill down into the data and learn as much as I could about the 88 students. What I found was somewhat surprising: most of our drop outs left us in October of their sophomore year; 12 of the 88 were seniors with less than a semester left until graduation; more girls than boys dropped out. These students had some things in common: attendance issues for at least six years before leaving school -- maybe they had a sentinel event such as drug addiction or pregnancy, and if the student entered our school in the 9th grade from another district and had failed at least one grade, they would become a drop out in our system.*

*The solutions for these issues did not cost money. They did take time and focused services. Within two years that number of 88 dropouts was cut to 64; within four years it was 32.*

*The rationale behind offering planning grants to school districts in Kentucky that raised the dropout age is to allow districts time to define who these students are; determine why and when school is losing them; determine where in the education pipeline they are getting off track; collaborate with the available resources to strategically address the data and build a system of support.*

*It WILL take a village. You must communicate with higher education, the courts, law enforcement, social services, churches, civic organizations -- with EVERYBODY -- that this is a new day and we NEED them to be a part of this solution.*

*In March of 2013, a regulation was finalized. In my office, we fondly refer to it is Alternatives #19. [Officially, its 704 KAR 19:002](#), Alternative education programs. You may access it on the Kentucky Department of Education [website](#) with many ancillary materials to assist in implementing your alternatives for kids.*

*In Section 2. General Requirements, it says a district shall ensure that each alternative education program:*

- 1. aligns with college and career readiness outcomes;*
- 2. is not limited in scope or design; and*
- 3. includes training to build capacity of staff and administrators to deliver high-quality services and programming that conform with best practices and guide all students to college and career readiness.*

*So what do we mean by alternative?*

*[KRS 160.380](#) defines an alternative education program as a program that exists to meet the needs of students that cannot be addressed in a traditional classroom setting, but through the assignment of students to alternative classrooms, centers, or campuses that are designed to remediate academic performance, improve behavior, or provide an enhanced learning experience.*

*I challenge you to engage all the stakeholders in your community to make "enhanced learning experience" the definition of alternative. Innovative approaches to keep students in school by building a goals-based individual learning plan can happen. As a matter of fact, they must happen.*

*We have four districts that have been identified as districts of innovation. They and the 96 districts that received a planning grant as well as innovative leaders in the other districts are going to help us define what works. With Reg. 19 we will be tracking effective programs. Help is on the way!*

*But it isn't just about alternatives. It is about the quality of engagement of your students in each classroom, every day built around the Kentucky Core Academic Standards, systematic Response to Intervention support and vibrant superintendent, principal and teacher effectiveness systems. All of these things must work together so smoothly that none of us veers off course.*

*You see, Senate Bill 1 and the Kentucky Board of Education have said, we will -- through Unbridled Learning -- get every student to college- and career-readiness. Is that bold? Is that courageous? Is that difficult? Is that hard? Can we do it?*

*Well in 1969, we put a man on the moon with less technology than most of you have in your living room today. That only happened because we, as a nation, said it was worth the sacrifice. We defined what we wanted to do; we dedicated and redirected resources to do it in the face of political opposition; we enlisted men (mostly) and some women scientists and creative thinkers to solve the scientific gap that stood between us and the moon.*

*Getting all Kentucky children college- and career-ready is just as bold; just as courageous; just as important as settling Plymouth Rock, going to the moon or any other accomplishment. The challenge will be, do we, as a commonwealth, have the common will to see that it is done for our children and their children? Do we have the courage to set aside politics, community pressure for less, and our own biases and past experiences to make it happen?*

*Passing SB 97 and raising the compulsory attendance age is an incredible first step, but it is only the beginning. You, I believe, are going to do it, not because it is easy, but because it is hard and because it is RIGHT.*

*Thank you for being the leaders that you are in this effort. I'm from the Kentucky Department of Education and we are here to help you! And you can quote me on that!*

*Susan Allred  
Interim Associate Commissioner  
Kentucky Department of Education*