



# Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner  
Terry Holliday



**August 14, 2015**

## **Turning around low-performing schools**

This week, the Interim Joint Committee on Education (IJCE) held a hearing to discuss low-performing schools. The committee received testimony from Dr. Charles Duke from the University of Virginia, Brent McKim with the Jefferson County Teachers Association and Dr. Tom Shelton, the executive director for the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents.

Since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) took effect in 2002, schools have been accountable for closing achievement gaps and working toward a goal of 100 percent of students proficient in reading and math based on state assessments. Under NCLB, if a school failed to meet targets for academic performance for all student groups, then it faced a number of sanctions that increased in severity the more years that a school failed to make progress. Sec. Arne Duncan used stimulus dollars to help improve low-performing schools. The 2010 session of the Kentucky General Assembly passed legislation to connect to federal requirements and Kentucky was able to gain more than \$50 million in funding through the School Improvement Grant process.

This process required Kentucky to identify the bottom five percent of schools based on reading and math performance. These schools then underwent a leadership audit to determine if the principal, school council and/or district had capacity to turn around the school. The school had four options to choose from in turning around the school – transformation, school closure, restaffing or external management. Most schools chose the transformation model. Jefferson County used the restaffing model. A number of school councils lost authority and some principals were replaced. On rare occasions, the school district was found to lack the capacity to lead the turnaround, so the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) assumed control of school improvement efforts.

For the most part, the Kentucky turnaround model has been successful. Three schools have been named model schools after improving student performance. Pulaski County, East Carter and Franklin Simpson High Schools have moved from the bottom five percent to the top 10 percent of high schools in Kentucky. Many other schools also have improved, however, we continue to see schools in our large urban areas struggle.

The presentations to the IJCE this week highlighted what KDE believes are some essential components of improving low-performing schools. KDE believes that our low-performing schools need to have comprehensive reviews that identify strengths and areas for improvement in teaching and learning. These reviews are then the basis for short- and long-term plans. KDE also believes that low-performing schools need full-time coaches for the principal, language arts instruction and math instruction. The ONLY WAY to turnaround student performance is by supporting classroom teachers in these schools and providing them with the resources needed to improve student learning. KDE also believes that parent/community support and strong discipline are essential support tools to help teachers improve learning outcomes.

The last few years have seen significant debate about the pros and cons of school choice and charter schools. I have always been an advocate of school choice. Anything that gets parents more involved in

educational decisions should be supported. However, school choice should be controlled by the local school board, which has the responsibility for the schools in its community.

I am certain the debate on how to turnaround low performing schools and close achievement gaps will continue to be an important topic. There are no simple answers. Our schools cannot do this work in isolation. While we have seen many schools and communities improve dramatically, we have also seen a number of schools languish in low performance.

Schools are often a reflection of the community in which they are located. In our large urban communities, high unemployment, poverty and crime are often ongoing challenges. Many students and parents feel hopeless. Turning around schools in these communities will require a unified effort – our cities, local elected officials, school districts, business and community leaders and our state policy makers will all need to work together. Failure to unify these communities will result in a continued drain on local and state economies and the lost promise of thousands of young people's future.

Terry Holliday, Ph.D.  
Education Commissioner