



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
Terry Holliday



September 7, 2012

Three Education Topics that Must Be Addressed

The great American tradition of national political conventions has been the major focus of the last few weeks. While the outcome of the conventions (nomination of a presidential candidate) was never in doubt, the conventions do provide some insight as to the agenda for the candidates if elected. While both parties certainly focused on key issues, I found that the education topic did not receive as much attention as I would have hoped for from either party. Regardless of the outcome of the presidential election, I feel that there are several key issues that must be addressed if this nation is to ensure a bright future for our children.

First and foremost, we must address poverty in this nation. The U.S. has the highest poverty rate for children among the industrialized nations. Poverty is the strongest predictor of educational outcomes. In his book [*Measure of a Nation*](#), Howard Steven Friedman makes a strong case about the connection between poverty and education. Of the Americans who are classified as low-income who do not gain a college degree, 46 percent remain in the lowest economic quintile, while only 16 percent who did gain a college degree remain in the lowest quintile.

As I visit schools and districts across Kentucky, I am struck by the large gap between those districts who have high percentages of childhood poverty and those that have stronger socioeconomic indicators. The free and reduced-price meal percentage varies from 2 percent to 100 percent across Kentucky schools. In general, schools with large percentages of students in poverty spend less per pupil, which in turn means less funding to meet the needs of children.

Another key concern that must be addressed is the provision of high-quality preschool programs to children, especially those in poverty. Currently, parents who earn less than \$15,000 per year enroll their children in preschool programs at a rate 20 percent lower than the national average. The children who need the most help in closing the achievement gap do not have access to the very programs that will pay significant benefits to them and society in the long run.

Finally, we must address the costs of higher education. The growing gap between those who can afford higher education and those who cannot is one of the most dangerous trends in our nation. The umbrella that will shelter our children from the economic storm is higher

education, whether in the form of a one-year technical degree, two-year associate degree or four-year degree.

Neither party nor presidential candidate has all the answers to the challenges facing our nation. However, I hope educators will look closely at how the candidates address these key education issues. While there are many other hot buttons such as innovation, school choice, vouchers, teacher preparation, teacher evaluation, accountability waivers and more, I believe the three issues I have highlighted are the keys to helping more children be prepared for success in their future.

Terry Holliday, Ph.D.