



Commissioner's Comments

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Kentucky Commissioner of Education

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#beproudofwhoyouare

This week, I was able to get out of Frankfort and do what I most like to do, visit with students, teachers and administrators. I travelled to Warren County. It was a great start to my visits to schools and districts throughout the state. Superintendent Rob Clayton hosted me at the central office and then accompanied me to two Warren County elementary schools.

Superintendent Clayton is a dedicated and committed educator, intent on focusing on children. You may ask how I know this. The strongest evidence was my very visit. There was not fanfare for my arrival. The attention was where it should be – on the schools and what was happening in them. To me, it speaks volumes when people recognize that the real stars of public education are our students and educators.

First, we visited with the principal of Briarwood Elementary, Lori Morris. Despite being in Focus status, Briarwood just earned recognition as a Distinguished/Progressing School. It was easy to see why. Students were the priority. The whole school environment was inviting and conducive to student learning at its best.

At Briarwood, students and teachers begin each morning in the gym with an assembly. This day, Superintendent Clayton presented every student and teacher with a window sticker they could proudly display in celebration of their accomplishments. It was remarkable to see their excitement. You could tell the students liked going to school here. You could tell Principal Morris along with all the teachers and support staff I met, loved their jobs and were dedicated to the students. So, congratulations to Briarwood Elementary, not only for their accountability designation, but for the nurturing environment in the school.

My next stop was Warren County Elementary, a traditionally struggling school. It has a high percentage of students in poverty and a significant number of English Language Learners who speak about 30 different languages. Principal Josh Porter has developed a similar environment to what I saw at Briarwood Elementary. I had the occasion to see several teachers in action. Without exception, each one had the students engaged in meaningful learning activities. This is an important distinction. It is not enough simply to have students engaged. Unless the content is meaningful to the students, their engagement will wane and they will not have a quality learning experience. Clearly, the students I saw were learning.

I was honored to visit Kristin Johnson's second-grade class and have the opportunity to read to her students. From the moment you enter the classroom, you feel the kids are in a warm, inviting and exciting environment. One mark of a good teacher, in my opinion, is cultivating a comfortable environment. These students did not know me, but they took to me immediately. There was no hesitancy or shyness with a new guy in the room. They were talkative and wanted to be involved.

I chose to read the book, *I Like Myself*, to the class, which has a great message for our students. No matter who you are, where you live, what you look like, be proud of who you are. In fact, the book discussion generated a Twitter hashtag, #beproudofwhoyouare, which I think I will try to use on a regular basis. I am so grateful to Ms. Johnson for letting me have some time with her students. I had fun, the students had fun and hopefully they learned a little about self-esteem in the process.

I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to share about my time in JaMarvin Durham's fourth-grade class. What I wouldn't do to have this guy's energy! Whether it was his way of keeping his students' attention with his call, "Classity class" and their response of "Yesity, yes" or the "whoop whoop" that they use to celebrate student participation in the class – he exuded an energy that was contagious. You could see that his students worked for him as well as themselves. It was not just a show either, they were engaged in the work of the day and he was really pushing the students not just to regurgitate material, but to put it in their own words in order to illustrate their level of understanding. It was a joy to watch.

I'm sure as I venture out more, which I plan to do, I will find stories like these repeated in schools across the Commonwealth. I have no doubt that there are a lot of dedicated and passionate people who work tirelessly to educate our children. Education is not an easy job, at times I would say it is one of the toughest jobs around. Yet, Kentucky's educators rise to the challenge each day. So, to all of our educators, #beproudfwhoyouare and what you do every day for the kids of Kentucky.