



Doc H's Blog

**Kentucky Education Commissioner
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A Perfect Storm is Brewing

In 1990, the Kentucky General Assembly took bold action to reform P-12 education. Through passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), the General Assembly agreed to invest in education and to implement numerous policies and actions that would raise student achievement. At the time, Kentucky was one of the bottom two or three performers among states.

Fast forward 23 years, and we now see Kentucky at or above national average on many measures of student achievement. KERA worked due to the bold vision of the General Assembly and the tremendous work of Kentucky educators.

In 2009, the Kentucky General Assembly again took bold action to reform P-12 education. With the passage of Senate Bill 1, the General Assembly pushed P-12 education toward a higher goal of college- and career-readiness for all students. While KERA had focused on basic academic performance, Senate Bill 1 now focused on college/career-readiness and national/international competitiveness of our Kentucky graduates. Senate Bill 1 has worked as evidenced by increased college/career-readiness rates and graduation rates.

With KERA, there was a significant investment in funds. Programs like Extended School Services, preschool, professional development, teacher salaries, school-based decision making councils, Family and Youth Resource Service Centers, textbooks, and technology received significant dollars through the state budget.

With the passage of Senate Bill 1, there were no additional dollars provided for standards development, assessments, accountability, professional development, textbooks, technology, or student support services. The clear message from the General Assembly was educators had the funding they needed in existing budgets. However, no one dreamed that throughout the next four years the General Assembly would have to greatly reduce funding for public education due to the recession.

Basically, the General Assembly has not been able to honor the commitments made through KERA or Senate Bill 1 due to the recession and lack of economic recovery. How deep have the cuts to education been?

Since the 2008 session of the General Assembly, the per pupil amount has dropped by \$33. In FY 2009, the General Assembly provided \$2,461,236,248 for basic SEEK funding; the amount in FY 2013 was \$2,397,016,693. The General Assembly has allocated \$64,219,555 less during a time that our Average Daily Attendance has increased by more than 10,000 students.

KERA provided Flexible Focus Funding for professional development, preschool, textbooks, safe schools, and extended school services. Since the passage of Senate Bill 1 in 2009, funding for professional development has been reduced by more than \$9 million, safe schools have been reduced by more than \$6 million, extended school services have been reduced by more than \$19 million, textbooks have been reduced by more than \$21 million, and preschool has been reduced by \$3.8 million. In FY 2008, Flex Focus Funds totaled \$154,099,600; in FY 2013, the flex focus amount was \$93,143,900 -- a total reduction of \$60,955,700.

KERA also established a strong focus on technology. In the last four years, we have seen a reduction in excess of \$8 million in basic support for the technology infrastructure and the loss of a \$50 million bond that helped districts purchase technology equipment.

The impact on education has been significant. In the last three years, we have lost more than 1,800 teachers due to budget cuts.

Local school districts have had to rely on local property taxes to offset some of the state cuts. In FY 2009, local support for education totaled \$825,184,656. In 2013, the amount had increased to \$872,904,155. This was an increase of \$47,719,499 from local sources which rely heavily on property taxes. The net result is that the state is pushing more of the cost of public education on to local property owners. This means that we are seeing a growing gap in equity of funding between school districts. The gap between the school district with the highest funding per pupil and the school district with the lowest funding per pupil in FY 2009 was \$8,719. By FY 2013, the disparity had increased to \$11,338. This means that the highest funding school district has on average more than \$250,000 per classroom to provide a high quality education.

The significant reduction in state funds is only one part of the perfect storm that is brewing. In the spring of 2014, our school districts will have to deal with the budget cuts from federal sequestration – an estimated \$57 million in cuts to programs like Title I, special needs students, migrant students, and other at-risk student populations. Estimates of the loss in positions are around 1,300.

Finally, our school districts will see the other part of the perfect storm as they budget for 2014-15. The Kentucky School Board Insurance Trust settlement will happen in the next few months and will place another \$50-60 million cost on our districts. Districts will have to borrow money to pay these assessments. To repay the loans, districts will have to take money out of their operating funds that normally would be used to hire staff and provide support services for students.

The perfect storm is certainly brewing in Kentucky education. The only possibility for our school districts is to seek restoration of state funds since we see little hope coming from the federal level of any type of resolution to federal budget and sequestration cuts.

Educators and parents all across Kentucky have come together to focus on restoration of education funds during the 2014 General Assembly. Failure to see funds restored will result in significant layoffs for the 2014-15 school year. Parents will see the impact in larger class sizes and less support for children who are struggling. Kentucky will see declining graduation rates, higher dropout rates, fewer children reaching college- and career-ready requirements, and negative impacts on social, health, and juvenile justice programs. I hope readers will let their voices be heard.

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Education Commissioner