



Commissioner's

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Comments

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Need inspiration? Visit a Kentucky public school

This was a busy week for education in Frankfort. Everyone is still trying to determine the impact of potential budget reductions and proposed legislation, and the Kentucky Board of Education met for its bimonthly meeting. Yet, every day is a busy day in our public schools and districts with the time spent focused on educating our children and inspiring them to do great things. I had the opportunity to visit several schools this week, and doing so inspired me too.

First, I spent my Monday morning at the Kentucky School for the Deaf in Danville. It was a wonderful time – meeting the staff, interacting with students, and seeing some pretty incredible instruction. While there is work to do to improve, it was a great reminder for me of the incredible power of education and the role I play in that for these students. As most of you know, in addition to being commissioner of education, I also act as the superintendent for the Kentucky School for the Blind (KSB) and the Kentucky School for the Deaf (KSD). There is much potential in each of these schools and we are working to move both schools to the next level by setting higher expectations for them. At the center of this work are the kids. It was great to see how excited the students at the Kentucky School for the Deaf are about their school.

On Thursday of this week, I spent the day in Hickman County with Superintendent Casey Henderson. For about an hour, I talked with him and central office staff about their needs and my vision for the future. But the real exciting stuff was still to come. Principal Richard Todd took me on a tour of Hickman County Elementary School. This guy's personality and leadership style are infectious. It is clear that his kids and teachers love him. He could not go more than five steps without a student saying hello or giving him a big hug.

From the time you walk in to the school, you know kids are the focus. The halls are decorated with student work and the teachers' classrooms are reflections of their personalities. In Jenah Blalock's class, the desks are arranged in a most original way that allows her and her special education teacher to easily move between students. The room was filled with productive noise – meaning the students were hard at work in groups, but were very focused on the task at hand. They kept working when we entered the room, which told me they are used to outsiders coming in to watch class.

In Emily Smith's first grade class, all of the students had worked hard to achieve their goals in reading. They were excited and it was great to see how proud they were of themselves when I spoke with them about it. The students were inviting, engaging and confident. You could see a clear relationship of respect between the students and Ms. Smith. They were willing to work hard for her and did not want to disappoint.

My next visit was to the high school where Kevin Estes is principal. What an incredible experience! Again, leadership is key. He and his staff have developed a culture of achievement in which students know they are cared for and held to a high standard. I spent an hour with about 25 juniors in Jeanna Kimbell's Non-Profit Leadership Studies dual credit class offered through Murray State University. They asked questions of me and I had a few of my own for them. We learned a lot from each other. Well, I learned a lot from them anyway.

Finally, I had the opportunity to participate in the Falcon Academy Celebration and Partner Recognition. Through this program, the high school partners with Murray State and Western Kentucky Community and Technical College to provide students with dual credit opportunities. Students are graduating from high school with enough credit to be considered college sophomores, and doing so with fantastic academic performance.

There are a couple key elements of the program that must be noted. First, it is open to all students, not just a few or the brightest, but all students. Second, this student opportunity is made possible by community partners who, several years ago, decided the schools could be better if they helped. And helped they have. No student in the Falcon Academy pays for books or tuition. Community partners cover the cost of tuition; the Hickman Co. Board of Education covers the cost of the books. Also, the university and community college are full partners with the school, so there are no turf issues or concerns with the level of instruction. It is an incredible model.

Weeks like this inspire, recharge and focus me, despite having to deal with things like potential budget cuts. In fact, several people have asked me, if I had known the budget situation prior to taking this position, would I have made the same choice? Absolutely! I am proud to be Kentucky's Commissioner of Education. Why? Because in Kentucky, we care about ensuring a better life for our students. If you ever doubt that, or need some inspiration of your own about the future of our Commonwealth, all you need do is visit your local school and observe public education in action.