

Kentucky Board of Education
October 5, 2016
Report from the Secretary
Education and Workforce Development Cabinet

Kentucky's Achievement Gaps: Our Collective Failure

Kentucky's gaps between the academic performance of Black and White students and economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students remain pronounced. In some cases, performance gaps have even widened. Kentucky's traditional public schools, including schools in our urban school districts, have found no solution for significantly narrowing the gaps. The Kentucky Department of Education's (KDE) recent release of 2016 K-PREP assessment results show that significant achievement gaps persist between African American and White students and between Hispanic and White students. In elementary school reading, 60% of White students scored proficient or distinguished compared to only 33.7% of African American students. Elementary school mathematics was worse, where 55.2% of White students were proficient or distinguished compared to only 31.5% of African American students.

While the achievement gaps at the state level were significant in 2015-2016, the gaps were even larger in Fayette County Public Schools (FCPS) and Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS). In JCPS, 61.4% of White elementary school students were proficient or distinguished in reading as compared to 31.1% of African American students (*30.3% difference*). That means White students in JCPS slightly outperformed White students across the state at the same time that African American students in JCPS performed worse than African American students across the state. The magnitude of the achievement gaps in FCPS is even greater. In FCPS, 70.2% of White elementary school students were proficient or distinguished in reading compared to only 34.8% of African American students (*35.4% difference*).

The performance of students of color at the school level is worthy of consideration as well. At Maupin Elementary School in JCPS, 30% of White students scored at the proficient or distinguished level in reading. As concerning as that percentage is, it is even more bothersome that only 9.3% of their African American classmates were proficient or distinguished in reading. Student performance in mathematics at Maupin is concerning as well: 20% of White students scored proficient or distinguished as compared to 5.3% of African American students. There is no doubt that across the state and particularly in Fayette and Jefferson counties, we continue to fail to reach our African American students. And with no successful approach in hand for meeting the academic needs of low-income children and children of color, education leaders, interest groups, and policy makers across the Commonwealth fight fiercely to keep schooling approaches out of Kentucky that have proven to be successful with economically disadvantaged children and children of color.

It is incomprehensible that leaders and policy makers at the state and local levels year after year assert that our traditional public schools are meeting the needs of economically disadvantaged students and students of color, and that the additional tool of public charter schools, which have been most successful across the country with these very groups of students, are not needed in Kentucky. Instead, leaders and policy makers have been content to pass legislation and implement untested, half-baked programs and strategies in the name of closing achievement gaps. Unfortunately for our children, these programs have rarely been successful.

A high profile example of such a strategy is Kentucky's Districts of Innovation passed in the 2012 regular session of the General Assembly as House Bill 37. This measure, sold as an alternative to public charter school legislation, was touted as a measure to give schools and school districts the flexibility needed to narrow achievement gaps. Now years later, Kentucky sees what many of us knew from the beginning; that Districts of Innovation legislation provides public school districts with nearly no power that they did not already possess. In fact, a survey of superintendents and principals from the few districts that have been designated 'Districts of Innovation' would reveal that these districts now do nearly nothing that they would not otherwise do without the designation. Districts of Innovation have not narrowed Kentucky's achievement gap.

Public Charter Schools: Raising Performance and Closing Gaps

Public charter schools in high poverty urban communities across the U.S. have now consistently demonstrated positive effects on student achievement for economically disadvantaged students and students of color, especially for economically disadvantaged students of color. Kentucky stands to benefit tremendously from the lessons learned in the 43 states (and DC) that have already passed charter school legislation. Central to the charter concept is school autonomy and the flexibility to experiment with different school models. That experimentation has resulted in unique school models that are changing the academic performance trajectories and lives of economically disadvantaged children and children of color in communities across the U.S.

For example, the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) features extended school days in public charter schools across the country. KIPP's teachers work an extended school day and an extended school year. KIPP uses the extended time to give children adequate time to experience high quality learning experiences, character education, and field learning experiences. Co-curricular learning experiences are incredibly important for all children, but for children from low-income families who might not otherwise have such experiences, experiencing enrichment and field learning during the school day is essential to their academic success. Additionally, KIPP's longer school day gives teachers additional time for common lesson planning and collaboration; a recognized practice that contributes to professional learning for teachers, and leads to more integrated and impactful learning experiences for children. Similarly, The Charles A. Tindley Accelerated School in Indianapolis also utilizes an extended school day model. Students at Tindley attend school until 5 pm daily. From 3pm to 5 pm, students are working in small groups or one-on-one with teachers receiving supplemental instruction in their areas of needed. The successes of KIPP and the Charles A. Tindley Accelerated School are indisputable.

Additional examples of public charter school success include Aspire Public Schools which has become one of the highest-performing school networks in the nation, serving predominantly low-income students in Tennessee and California. Aspire sends most of its graduating seniors to college. Also, Georgia's Pataula Charter Academy which combines Expeditionary Learning. Pataula takes students outside the classroom to do field work relevant to their studies, and a *looping* model that keeps one teacher with the same class of students for two years. In every subject tested, Pataula students—two-thirds of whom come from low-income families—score above statewide averages on Georgia's achievement test.

Kentucky's 2016 assessment results provide even further evidence that it is past time for Kentucky to pass a strong public charter school law, and bring to our communities and our children a tool which has proven to be successful with reducing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps. Everything Kentucky is currently doing has proven to not be enough to get the job done.