

Funding and...

Consideration of Policy Challenges to Equity and Achievement in Kentucky's Public Schools

Report of the Commissioner to the Kentucky Board of Education

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I have had the honor and privilege of leading the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) for over a year now. I had worked with KDE and the Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) prior to my appointment, so I knew of much of the important work and initiatives underway. As commissioner, my respect for the leaders at KDE and in schools and districts across the state has only grown. Be assured that passionate, talented, generous education professionals across Kentucky, work tirelessly to provide support and high quality learning experiences every single day.

Prior to coming to KDE, I was also aware that our public education system faces significant financial challenges. Undoubtedly, limited resources in key areas and in some regions of the state are hindering our ability to provide the type of experiences our children deserve.

One example of financial constraints is in the area of career and technical education (CTE). Creating and maintaining a comprehensive system where every student has access to CTE programs that equip them for postsecondary and workforce success will require significant investment by the state, local communities, and the private sector. The Kentucky General Assembly and the Governor have recently taken major steps toward these goals; including the creation of the Work Ready Skills Initiative, the Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship, and the Dual Credit Scholarship. But ensuring these learning opportunities for all Kentucky students will require additional resource allocation. This is one of several areas where additional investment will be necessary.

While it is important that we address our funding challenges in public education, I am deeply concerned that much of the dialogue has been largely limited to just a funding conversation. The reality of our situation, however, is that achieving KDE and KBE's shared vision of ensuring that each and every student, regardless of background and characteristics, is empowered and equipped to pursue a successful future, will take much more than funding. Some policy and practice issues foundational to equity and achievement are related to funding, and other issues are independent of funding. Consider a few examples.

First, it is important to note that state and federal funding for public education comes to the local school district. At the district level, there remains pretty wide variation in per pupil spending across Kentucky school districts. Those disparities are largely a function of differences in property wealth and local revenue at the district level. In addition to these funding disparities between school districts, attention should be given to the disparities within school districts. Although the state and federal government provide funding to school districts in most instances, decisions about the allocation of resources within a district, including across schools, are primarily made at the local district level.

Ensuring equitable opportunities for each and every student will require local school boards and superintendents to ensure that funds are being equitably allocated within school districts, in a manner that targets resources where they are most needed, often with our most vulnerable students. Simply increasing funding for public schools will not address these fundamental inequities in some school districts.

The most important aspect of what we do in public education centers on what happens in classrooms. While support services for students are critically important, especially for many disadvantaged students, teaching and learning is the core business of schools.

There is no more important element to providing high quality learning experiences for students than ensuring all students have a high quality and effective teacher. I wish I could tell you that every Kentucky student has access to an effective teacher, but we all know that is simply not true. What is even more unfortunate, in Kentucky and beyond, it is most often low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities who are less likely to have access to experienced, highly skilled, effective teachers. Unfortunately, in classrooms across Kentucky, too many of our students

are served by long-term substitute teachers or teachers who lack the knowledge, skills, experience, disposition, or willingness to meet their academic needs.

In Kentucky, as across the U.S., with exceptions of course, our more experienced, more effective teachers tend to more often serve middle income and affluent White students. Low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities are less likely than their more affluent, White, and typical peers to have access to more experienced teachers. Teachers with less classroom experience and less formal training are often placed in the most challenging classrooms, schools, and neighborhoods; and not surprising, those teachers are more likely to exit schools than their more experienced, more skilled counterparts for a new job or career. Who would think putting our least experienced teachers in the most challenging classrooms, often with very little support, is a promising practice for building new teacher capacity and retaining new teachers in the profession? Who would argue that such practice or decision making is in the best interest of students? Why do so many adults remain silent about such practices when we know students are hurt as a result?

By policy, practices, or constraints of collective bargaining agreements, we ensure that our most vulnerable children are less likely to have high quality teachers, when their need is the greatest. I contend that our unwillingness, and even resistance, to ensuring that children with the greatest need have the same opportunity as their more privileged peers to have an effective teacher is *the* greatest educational equity policy failure of our time. Simply increasing funding for public education will not address that failure.

All of our work at the Kentucky Department of Education is aimed at ensuring that each and every Kentucky student is empowered and equipped to pursue a successful future. Our team works tirelessly with administrators, educators, parents and communities to see this vision fulfilled. Our policy agenda has and will continue to include advocating for additional strategic investment in public education. However, we know Kentucky public schools well enough to know that our challenges include, but go well beyond, funding.