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Public Comment Pursuant to Agenda Items XVI.E., XVI.F. and XVII.B. KBE Meeting 040721

"Ask compelling questions about the founding of the United States. Generate supporting questions to answer compelling questions about the founding of the United States. Identify the types of supporting questions each of the social studies disciplines uses to answer compelling and supporting questions." This is the opening salvo of circle-talk standards Kentucky fifth grade social studies students are now being "compelled" to learn. "Identify the types of supporting questions used to answer supporting questions." . . . confused?? Imagine how students feel!

I have reached out to you and the former board now more than once with overwhelming evidence documenting the abject failure of and the lack of research supporting the so-called "inquiry model" upon which the Kentucky social studies standards are now based. I have repeatedly offered to present my research clearly showing the superior efficacy of explicit content-rich instruction. No one seems to care or even engage in dialogue . . . I have simply been ignored! At least challenge my findings . . . disclose your peer reviewed quantitative data? Justify your position with evidence? I challenge Kathy Swan, S.G. Grant, John K. Lee (founders of the so-called C3 movement) or anyone at KDE to an open and fair debate on the subject. So far, those discussions have not occurred. Kentucky students and educators deserve better!

Kentucky teachers have finally now focused on the reality of these content devoid standards and they are rightly concerned. Even the KBE's former members who promulgated the standards have asked you to correct what they now acknowledge as an egregious error. They too are all being ignored! No one doubts the high sounding and appealing nature of the edu-speak buzz-words espoused by the constructivist movement which has for decades forced upon schools and colleges of education its non-evidence-based dogma: "Inquiry, project, problem and discovery based learning"; "student control/ownership"; "flipped classrooms"; "maker spaces"; "hands on" and the new darling of the "guide on the side" set, "minds on", all evoke enthralling, magical images of a fairy-tale "highly engaged student led" classroom. The only problem . . . it's all just that, a fairy tale! Calls for students to "use higher order thinking skills", "take deeper dives" to "think like mathematicians, scientists or historians" and learn "21st century skills" sound equally captivating but the research-based reality is that students must first develop fundamental thinking skills, learn to "swim" before they "dive", start as

novices just like those scientists and historians did during their many years acquiring foundational knowledge and were not Shakespeare, the multiplication tables, photosynthesis and the meaning of the Preamble equally important in the 20th century! Yes, students must first learn basic content knowledge in a broad array of subjects including history! Though all these cool sounding buzzwords have some merit -- I use components of most daily in my classroom -- they simply cannot be the “be-all, end-all” basis now compelled by the state for our standards, pedagogy, and assessments! The overwhelming evidence instead posits a strong student-centered, but teacher led approach . . . one based upon content rich standards and explicit direct instruction methods . . . the old Madeline Hunter, “anticipatory set”, “I do”, “we do”, “you do” model steeped in qualitative descriptive feedback and formative assessment long proven in classrooms everywhere and unequivocally supported by the research. The very latest research on the science of how we learn, especially cognitive load theory, deals yet the definitive blow to those still clinging to the phantom hope of John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and the so-called “progressive” movement. So important and timely here are the students most negatively impacted by the inquiry approach yet positively by direct instruction, our special needs populations and lower academic achievers, those gaps we so desperately want to close!

This is not a Republican or Democratic issue, but a what’s best for kids issue. I have been labeled both a “left wing liberal” and a “right wing conservative”. I oppose state funding of charter and parochial schools, I support implicit bias training (to include ethnicity, race, religion, and gender identity) and oppose any constraints on the teaching of evolution and environmental issues, yet I am in favor of rigorous content rich standards in all subjects, a focus on core instruction in reading, math, science and the humanities, and valid/reliable norm-referenced standardized assessments (NAEP, ITBS). I simply want what is best for kids!

It is not too late! The pandemic has dealt a set back to all, but now we have an opportunity for reset as we explore how to teach social studies and other content areas. We must look only to Kentucky’s most recent completely disastrous attempt at science standards and assessment. I challenge any one to, with a straight face, defend Kentucky’s current situation in science. We must not stick our heads in the sand and let the same thing happen to social studies! You can fix it! There are good models across the country that draw on the positive attributes of inquiry (and there are some) while still demanding content rich standards (e.g., Massachusetts).

One final note . . . The KPREP’s usefulness, validity and reliability is suspect in a normal year, but compelling states to administer these exams in the middle of a pandemic is tantamount to child abuse! I understand that USDOE, regrettably, has refused waivers for year-end testing but surely, we should not exacerbate the travesty and at least forego assessments in on-demand writing and social studies, tests not required by ESSA? Just what is the rationale for testing this year? The edu-crats say it’s diagnostic, to show gaps caused by the pandemic, but Kentucky’s great teachers and administrators already know the chasms created by “virtual

learning” and do not need an expensive time-wasting federally mandated test to so inform. Could the rationale instead have something to do with large federal political donations made by affiliates of the three large testing contractors? They alone stand to gain from these tests this year!

Do what is right by Kentucky kids. Correct the social studies fiasco, adhere to the science of how we learn as new standards and assessments are developed, and do what you can to cancel or reduce this year’s test! I remain ready, willing, and able to help. Please let me hear from you.

Thanks,

Donnie Wilkerson

Teacher, Student Advocate and Concerned Kentuckian

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