

Public Comment Pursuant to Agenda Items IV.A., V. and IX from 080421. KBE Meeting 080521

First, let me commend Commissioner Glass for his open opposition to pre-filed bills in the Kentucky legislature, HR60 and HR69. These bills are nothing more than gag orders on Kentucky teachers, blatant censorship to Kentucky students and an outright affront to the First Amendment. Legislation limiting the discussion of racism must be soundly rejected. Should such an egregious and embarrassing legal restraint on free speech be enacted, I stand ready to join ranks in court with a fellow Kentuckian from a century ago, John Thomas Scopes!

Kudos too, to the Commissioner and Board for hosting the extensive statewide "Listening Tour". I participated in each event and found them to be very enlightening and great forums for public comment. However, it was quite disappointing to see such low turnout from stakeholders across the state. It was certainly not for lack of effort from the Department or Board as there were multiple staff members present for each of these afterhours sessions and the events were widely promoted. The exemplary job of the students who served as facilitators was remarkable! My thanks to all who participated. The caveat though is that any "take-aways" from this tour must be viewed carefully and not seen as representative statistical samplings of concerns from affected populations.

Having now watched all meetings of the Kentucky Coalition for Advancing Education it is quite disconcerting to see that many of the topics mentioned in the tours were hardly if at all discussed in these sessions. For example, by far the most often mentioned need (I believe it came up in every single venue!) was more focus on financial literacy. I failed to hear any discussion of this topic in any of the KCAE meetings or in the retreat presentation. There are other similarly ignored themes like the inclusion of introverts in our vision of diversity and the acceptance and understanding of diverse religious beliefs and non-belief especially in rural schools. Gender identity concerns expressed in the tour also did not make the cut. But maybe I just missed them! More importantly, the goal it seems from the Center for Innovation in Education (CIE, the group behind both the Listening Tour and the KCAE) is quite clear, the development of a new assessment and accountability model for Kentucky based on performance assessments. Yes, no such concrete proposal has been made but you can rest assured, it is forthcoming. One need only look to other states guided by CIE to see the end game. With CIE's guidance New Hampshire became the first state to adopt such a model under the Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority (IADA) as part of ESSA. Just maybe there was a plan in mind for Kentucky even before any listening tours, coalitions or summits convened! Ironically, New Hampshire and other states looking to pursue these so-called innovative assessments were at least partially informed by (believe it or not!) Kentucky's failed 1990s KIRIS model. Kentucky joined Maryland and Vermont during that period to subject students and teachers to what almost all would characterize as abject failures, yet we now stand again at the precipice of that same cliff!

These so called "performance assessments" are just more of the same old Deweyesque constructivist approaches that have been pushed by the colleges of education and government education agencies for decades. We talk about wanting change but the proposals always seem

to just double down on already failed models . . . KIRIS . . .CATS . . .KPREP . . .Program Reviews . . .NGSS . . . “through course tasks”, C3 and now whatever acronym we adopt for the “new” assessment. The failed model tried by Maryland two decades ago was called MSPAP (Maryland State Performance Assessment Program). It was finally scrapped amid outcries from students, teachers, administrators and parents labeling it the “MSPAP mishap”! Vermont and Nebraska joined Maryland and the very “poster child” for failed performance assessment models, Kentucky’s KIRIS, in abandoning their ill-conceived, unreliable and invalid systems! CIE’s New Hampshire brainchild is called PACE (Performance Assessment of Competency Education). It is hanging on, buoyed by research showing that it at least “does no harm” to student performance on the state’s still intertwined but questionably valid Smarter Balanced standardized assessments. Researchers warn other states however to refrain from using the New Hampshire model given the state’s small number of students, overall affluence and lack of diversity. Kentucky, for example, compared to New Hampshire has almost four times as many students, twenty times the number of African American students and double the percentage of students that are economically disadvantaged.

Equity must remain the central goal! But, what most fail to acknowledge is that the very gap groups we should be most concerned about, African American and economically disadvantaged, are those most negatively impacted by continued attempts to improve on the inquiry-project-problem based, so-called progressive education models. This pedagogical approach is marginal at best and more often wholly discredited in the literature. I have submitted to this board and ones previous the clear and overwhelming evidence supporting the vastly superior efficacy of strong knowledge-rich teacher led direct instruction, but no one seems to care! We have though only to be introspective. Just ponder if you will the following numbers from our own back door. During the years prior to Kentucky’s adoption of the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and its concomitant performance-like test, 65% of our elementary and middle school students scored proficient or distinguished on the science portion of KPREP. Since the new test has been administered only 29% achieved the P/D status. More telling, economically disadvantaged students were at 56% going in but are now only at 19%! Most concerning, African American students were at 40% proficient or distinguished pre-NGSS while after years of the “new and improved” model (in many ways similar to the performance-based systems sure to be proposed soon for all content areas) only 10% of students in this group are deemed proficient or distinguished. Can anything be more shameful, yet no one wants to talk about it!

Instead, we chose to double down and do the same thing to social studies! I’m sure you’re aware by now of the recent disastrous field test (What a smart decision by JCPS to not subject its kids to this travesty!) and the outcry from educators as they have finally focused on the equally disastrous C3 based standards. Based on an analysis of past KPREP scores and statistical progressions using the science results above, Kentucky can plan on seeing equally shameful reductions in social studies test scores over the coming years. From an overall 59% P/D to 26%, economically disadvantaged from 48% to 16% and African American from 35% to only 9%. I truly wish that these projections will not come to fruition . . . hope does spring eternal!

As you know all but two of the former members of the Kentucky Board of education who adopted the new standards led by Dr. Gary Houchens (the leader in pushing for their original adoption!) have now recanted their decision and asked you to revisit these standards. Even more telling is last month's bipartisan comprehensive report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute finding Kentucky's history and civics standards to be "mediocre", "needlessly complex" with "critical gaps in content, and a plethora of vague or overbroad standards". Kentucky barely earned a "C" with a score of 50/100. The report "strongly recommended" "significant revisions" including this one . . . **"Offer a full introduction to U.S. History in elementary school."** Sound familiar? All but two of Kentucky's bordering states scored higher . . . Tennessee earned one of the report's only five exemplary "A"s. Further south, Alabama received an "A", Mississippi, Georgia, Florida and South Carolina all earned "B"s! The state I've repeatedly suggested as a model for Kentucky, Massachusetts, also earned one of those five "A"s. New Hampshire, CIE's ostensible model for ill-advised performance assessments, came in with an "F"!

Solutions are not always simple but sometimes they are much simpler than many realize. How about these steps to increasing academic performance, achieving equity and building community/school/family/student trust?

1. Convene a summit of the colleges of education from around the state. Make them aware of the overwhelming body of peer reviewed academic and neuroscience research on how students learn. Do not attempt to prohibit them from teaching anything but at least expose them to the evidence supporting a strong knowledge based, teacher-lead but student-centered direct instruction curriculum and pedagogy. Point out the clear and convincing science of how students learn to read . . . the vital importance of strong phonics based early instruction and the equally important role of background knowledge. Emphasize that this will do more than anything to promote equity as it is the students in the gap most negatively impacted by our years of insistent adherence to the tenets of John Dewey, constructivism and whole-language reading instruction! We all want to think critically and deeply . . . the path to that depth must be paved with knowledge.
2. Stop building "straw men" to then easily tear down! No one is advocating that "teachers 'stand behind a podium', 'robotically lecturing' to students a list of 'disconnected facts and dates' for 'rote memorization' and 'regurgitation' on a 'fill in the bubble, multiple-guess' test". This is not direct instruction at all! But facts, dates and general knowledge are still very important and no, you can't just "look it up on Google". Memorize and multiple choice are not dirty words. The very people we owe our lives to became doctors, nurses, scientists and air traffic controllers by successfully passing rigorous multiple choice exams! Hundreds of other professions use these tests as entrance exams. Understanding the workings of short- and long-term memory is crucial!
3. Immediately replace the current social studies standards with ones patterned on an exemplary model like Massachusetts or Tennessee. Require inclusion of Kentucky studies at all levels and that full introduction to U.S. History in elementary school!
4. Use the same logic in adopting new science standards and as they come up for renewal, reading and math.

5. Push for the General Assembly to adopt a nationally norm-referenced selected response assessment to be given in reading, math, science and social studies at each grade level each year. ITBS would fill the bill nicely, cost less, use a minimum of valuable instructional time and provide timely results for use as formative tools the following year. Districts would then be able to track student performance vertically year by year in each content area. Read the research on the efficacy of well-designed multiple-choice/selected response exams.
6. Require districts to administer a locally designed writing assessment once at 4th, 7th and 10th grade. Score and provide feedback to students and teachers only. Do not use for accountability purposes. (Avoids any issue with inter-rater reliability.)
7. Require each school, dependent upon number of students, to hire at least one full-time arts and humanities instructor.
8. Keep accountability simple and “explainable in the grocery line” as former Commissioner Terry Holliday once said. This will do more to build that trust and communication among students, teachers, administrators, families and community identified by the Coalition and its empathy interviews as so critical.
9. Say no to the consultants, contractors and con-artists selling their latest snake-oil acronyms. Beware and vet the textbook companies rushing to cash in on the latest pot of federal money with their quickly contrived modifications of old resources adorned with new splashy covers and assurances of “alignment to the new standards”. Tread cautiously the waters of SEL. Read and research, look deeper than CASEL for what is truly research based!
10. Put the interests of kids first! Understand effect size. Beware the ubiquitous refrain “research based”. Anything with an effect size of .01 or greater can be considered “research based”. Look for those with effect sizes above that magic hinge point of .40. The average effect size of teacher as facilitator (“guide on the side”) is .19; the average effect size for teacher as purveyor of knowledge (“sage on the stage”) is .61! Students must come first and a commitment to equity must be paramount!

One of the primary stated goals of the Kentucky Coalition for Advancing Education is “to be involved in the design of a new assessment and accountability system for Kentucky”. I truly hope, in the best interests of our dear kids that the Coalition will heed the advice of C!E’s Dr. Doannie Tran . . . “We must know how to tell the difference between what we want to be true and what is true.”

Thanks as always for your kind attention and service to Kentucky’s kids!

Respectfully Submitted,

Donnie Wilkerson
Teacher, Student Advocate and Concerned Kentuckian

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]