

2836 Deerfield Drive
Villa Hills, KY 41017
April 10, 2023

To the members of the Kentucky Board of Education

RE: Briefing on “Vibrant Student Experiences in Literacy,” Scheduled for April 12, 2023

Dear KBE Members:

On Wednesday, April 12, 2023, you are scheduled to hear an update on better literacy experiences in Kentucky. It is a badly needed briefing.

The current literacy situation in Kentucky is essentially a crisis.

Results from the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that in the reading assessment, only 31% of all the Bluegrass State’s fourth graders tested Proficient or Above and just 29% of the state’s eighth graders met similar muster.

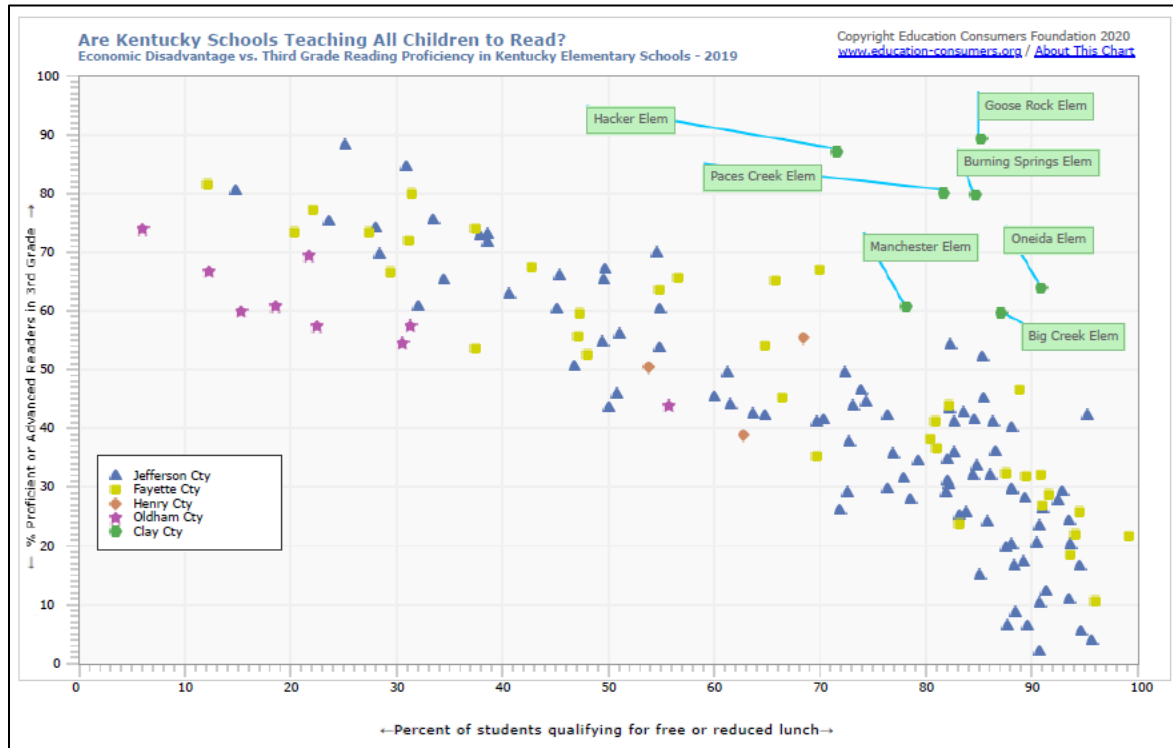
For the Bluegrass State’s Black students, the 2022 results were simply a disaster. Just 15% of the Black students in the fourth grade scored at least Proficient and just 12% of the state’s eighth grade Black students were able to meet this NAEP standard.

The good news is Kentucky can do much better. In fact, allow me to show you some surprising data that show in some Kentucky schools – right now – third grade reading proficiency rates are astonishingly high despite high poverty rates found in the same schools.

Figure 1 shows how some elementary schools in high-poverty Clay County (individual schools identified by name and with green hexagon plots) performed against schools in several other large and small Kentucky school districts before COVID messed up education.

The graph plots each school for the percentage of students eligible for the federal free and reduced cost school lunch program versus their third-grade reading proficiency rate on the 2019 KPREP third grade reading assessment.

Figure 1



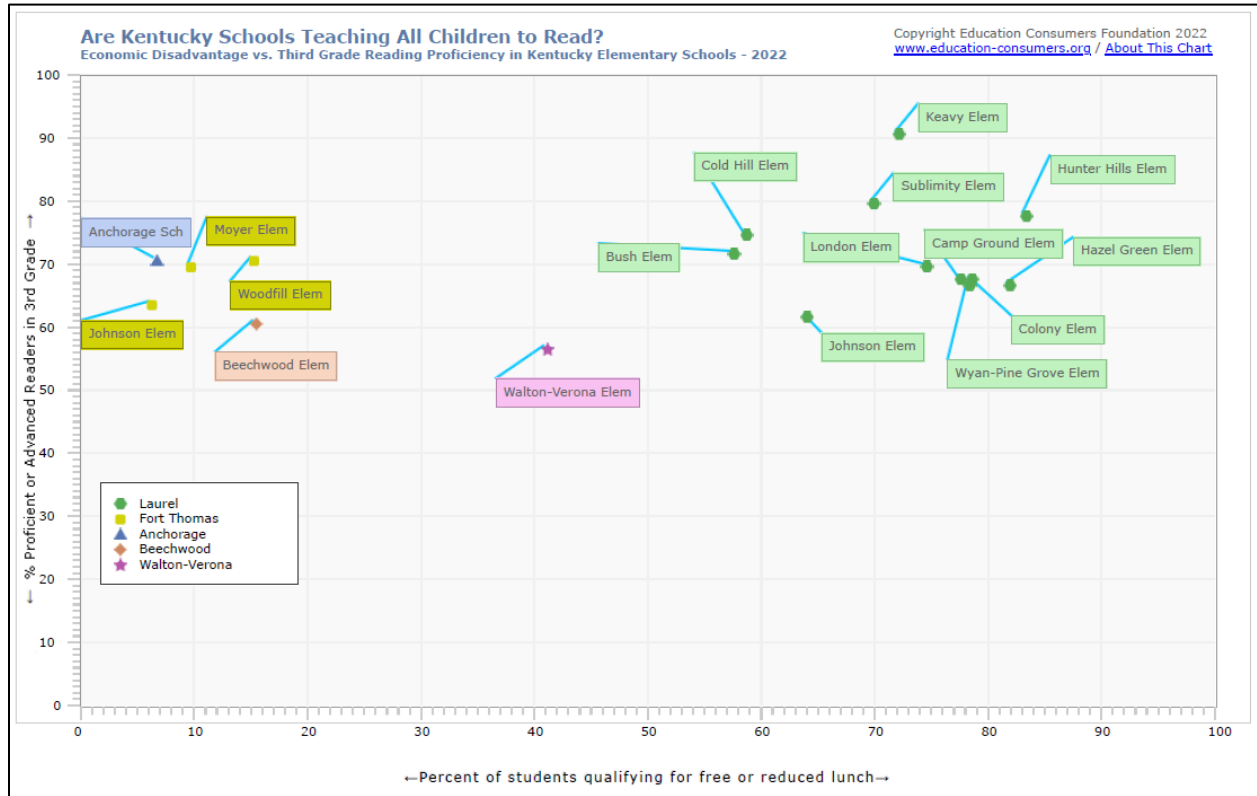
The Clay County schools’ performance is clearly exceptional, especially so for Goose Rock Elementary School. Despite its 85% school lunch eligibility, Goose Rock posted an 89.7% third grade reading proficiency rate in 2019.

It’s simply remarkable.

Sadly, COVID took a toll on Clay County’s performance in 2022, but another school district shows that good instruction can even overcome the pandemic.

Figure 2 shows 2022 results for schools in Laurel County (shown with green labels) versus some other interesting schools around the state. This is another really remarkable story.

Figure 2



Check the reading proficiency rates in the Laurel County elementary schools versus those in high-wealth Fort Thomas, Anchorage, Beechwood and Walton-Verona elementaries. Laurel County has much higher poverty but similar or even notably higher reading proficiency rates. Laurel County’s Keavy Elementary actually posted a post-COVID third grade reading proficiency rate over 90%.

It’s astonishing!

There is an explanation for what is going on.

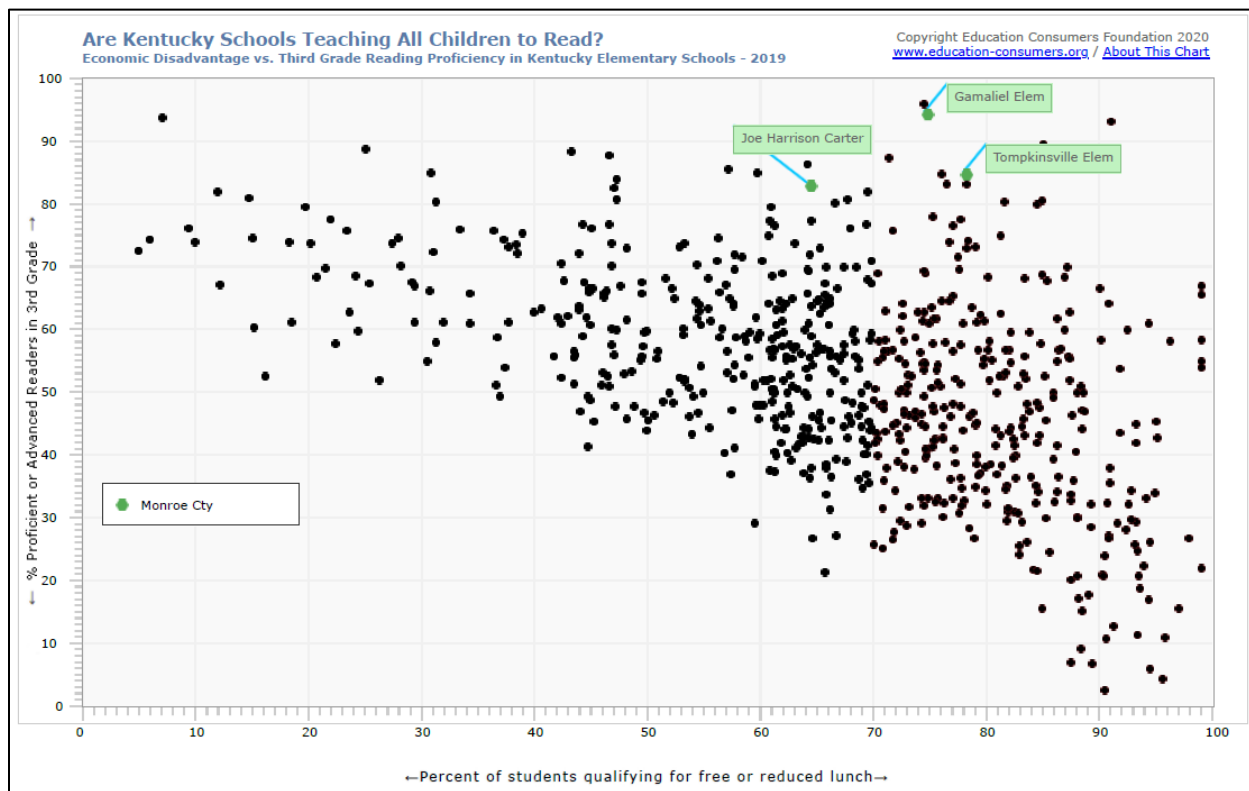
Schools in both Clay and Laurel counties have taken part since 2010 in a program funded by the Elgin Children’s Foundation to improve literacy instruction by using evidence from scientific research about what really works best. Clearly, that program has yielded some remarkable results.

Along the way, Clay and Laurel have shown that an excuse Kentuckians have heard through over three decades of KERA simply is not correct and poverty is NO excuse!

What’s needed is better trained teachers who know how to apply what science has established works best to teach reading.

By the way, you may be aware that Christie Biggerstaff, who is scheduled to present your literacy presentation at the board meeting, came out of the Monroe County School district. I think Figure 3 will encourage you that she is worth listening to.

Figure 3



In Figure 3 Monroe County’s schools are identified by green labels and green hexagons. Like the previous examples in Figures 1 and 2, it is clear Monroe County also knows how to teach reading MUCH better than most other places in the state. That Gamaliel Elementary third grade proficiency rate for 2019 is 94%, by the way. It’s just amazing.

Before closing, I think you need to see two more examples of what happens when teachers get better training on what science shows works best to teach reading.

Figures 4 and 5 show how Kentucky has compared to Mississippi (yes, Mississippi) over time for Grade 4 reading on the NAEP.

When you look at these graphs, understand that Mississippi began a retraining program for its elementary teachers on reading in 2015 following enactment of new reform legislation in 2013. By 2019, the results had become clear.

Oh, in case you don’t know, Mississippi’s training uses the same LETRS program that KDE is now sponsoring for Bluegrass State teachers.

Figure 4

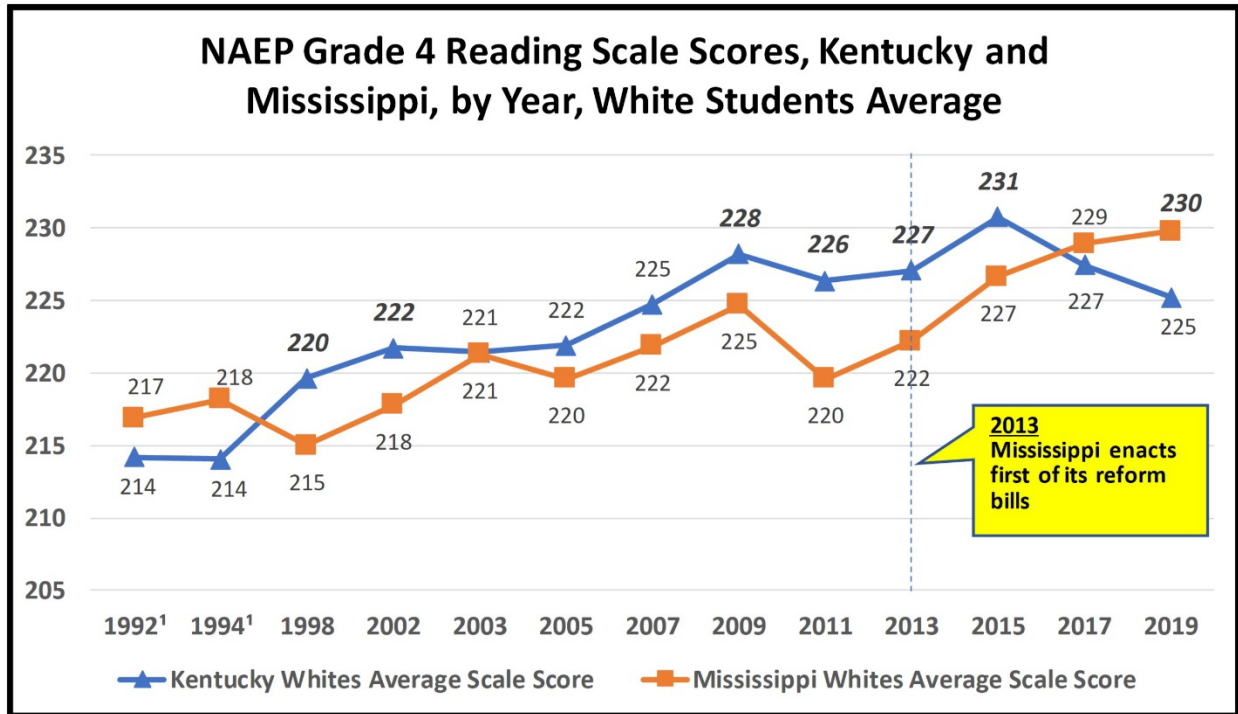
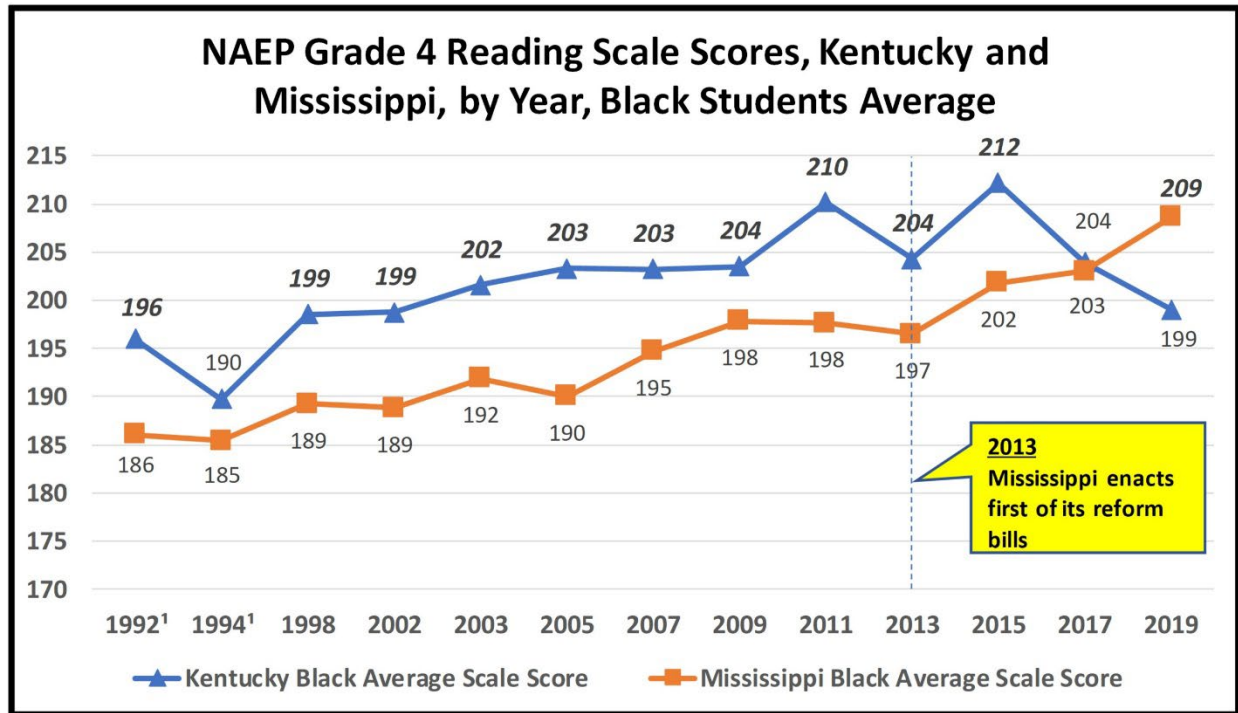


Figure 5



So, LETRS has a track record, too.

An important message about the LETRS training in Kentucky is that while 2,400 slots were funded for teachers in Phase 1 of the program, fewer than 1,900 actually signed up. Encouraging higher participation is something the state board and local boards need to get more involved with going forward. For a few ideas about that, I do know that some districts, such as Kenton County, provided stipends to teachers in LETRS Phase 1 and there are also benefits to improve teacher rank for participation, as well. But, support across all our districts needs improvement, in some cases a lot of improvement, and the state board might want to consider ways it can help such as making monitoring of progress a feature of each board meeting. The board could also work to make the media much more aware of what is happening.

I also suggest that the state board needs to bring in teachers and staff members from places like Laurel and Clay and Kenton counties to hear first-hand what is going on with reading in those school systems. I have talked to people in all three county systems and some really interesting things are happening that board members need to learn about. The enthusiasm alone is uplifting.

In closing, know that much better reading instruction is possible. In fact, great examples right here in Kentucky show that it is already happening. But the board needs to pay attention and make this a high priority item for continuous monitoring if students all across Kentucky are to benefit.

For still more information, I have several articles you might find of interest, online here:

“Reading proficiency rates rising in some Appalachian schools” - <https://bit.ly/3G2pMwA>

“KIDS need to be in-person at school” - <https://bit.ly/3VnSakn>

Sincerely yours,

Richard G. Innes