



‘Calculating’ candidates offer bad math on teacher salaries

By Jim Waters

The premise that Kentucky’s teachers have reached a point where they deserve irrevocable memberships to the Poor House is a widely accepted falsehood that remains just as untrue as oft-perpetuated myths such as popping your knuckles gives you arthritis and women drive worse than men.

So why do candidates in this year’s unimaginative and uninspiring gubernatorial campaign keep telling voters Kentucky teachers don’t get paid enough?

The answer reflects the calculating done by campaign directors: It’s easy to say that and comes with no political risk. And it sure helps seal the deal for support of teacher unions.

Can you imagine House Speaker Jody Richards gaining the endorsement of that union in Jefferson County – which he did recently – if he acknowledged that Kentucky’s teachers rank among the highest compensated in the United States?

And the Steven Henry campaign – highly marketable as a sleeping aid – offers this grand idea: Expand state gaming (code: gambling) and use the take to pay teachers more.

“Hallelujah!” shouted the union leaders, who just woke up over in the Amen Corner.

“We would use the new revenues from gaming to bring our teachers’ salaries up to the national average,” Henry wrote in an online Pol Watchers forum.

“Preach on, Brother!” shouted the leaders in the Jefferson County Teachers Association

And the choir sang: Several of Henry’s Democratic brothers vying for the nomination also cast Kentucky’s taxpayers and lawmakers as cheapskates when it comes to properly compensating teachers.

I resent that notion. You should, too.

Now the truth: When someone does a comprehensive assessment of compensation, Kentucky teachers rank among the country’s best paid.

Laugh if you want. It’s true.

Education researcher Terry Stoops at the John Locke Foundation crunched the numbers. When adjusted for factors including cost-of-living, the amount contributed by taxpayers to teachers’ pensions and average years of experience, Kentucky teachers ranked the ninth-best paid in the nation during the 2005-06 school year.

It’s no surprise Stoops preaches a different sermon than the National Education Association, which claimed that teachers in 34 states received better pay than Kentucky teachers and their measly \$41,903 salary that year. The

federation goes to great lengths to point out how such a pittance hovers close to a vow of poverty, considering the national average salary of \$46,417.

But that shortsighted view pales when compared with Stoops' more credible calculations.

He figured total compensation for teachers in 48 states (Massachusetts and New Hampshire are not included because of insufficient data) and the District of Columbia. Kentucky's teachers average \$53,985 in total compensation – better than five of our seven bordering states.

Those nearby states commanded lower adjusted salary levels because their teachers often pay more for housing, transportation and utilities than teachers in Kentucky.

This isn't exactly rocket science. Much of it involves common sense.

After all, it costs more to live in Connecticut than it does in Pikeville. That's why the \$59,499 base salary earned by Connecticut teachers won't go nearly as far. It's also one of the reasons why only 15 states and the District of Columbia had lower total compensation packages for their teachers than Connecticut – after considering all factors.

Another reason Kentucky's adjusted teachers' salaries rank among the highest in the South is the state's elevated level of employer pension contributions. Only nine states contributed more in 2005-06 than Kentucky's 13.11-percent pension match for teachers. In fact, our state's match remains significantly higher than the national average of 9 percent.

Kentucky faces many education problems: lack of accountability; entrenched labor bosses opposed to school choice; high dropout and remediation rates; and a widening race-based achievement gap in Louisville, our state's largest school district.

But teachers' salaries do not make that list.

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