



## KERA: Chartering a way to unfulfilled promises

By Jim Waters

Ironically, not long after the late Gov. Wallace Wilkinson signed the [Kentucky Education Reform Act](#) into law, another significant educational development occurred — America’s first charter schools were forming in Minnesota.

Both the reform act and [charter schools](#) resulted from the dreams of conscientious policymakers and educators driven to despair over the failure of the nation’s public education system to prepare our children for an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Supporters of both approaches purported that the well-being of students took top priority. But a large gap exists between the success of one approach and the failure of the other to deliver on big promises.

The ink from Wilkinson’s pen barely dried after he signed KERA into law in April 1990 before Frankfort’s leading — and mostly progressive — politicians started praising it as one of Kentucky’s greatest accomplishments.

The governor declared that the law represented “the most important piece of legislation since the signing of the (Kentucky) Constitution.”

In an emotional speech urging lawmakers to pass it, then-House Majority Leader Rep. Greg Stumbo, D-Prestonsburg — now House Speaker Stumbo — declared that “no child in Kentucky will ever have to look back and say that he or she didn’t receive the full educational opportunity that he or she is entitled to by the Constitution of this state.”

Fortunately for Stumbo — and unfortunately for Kentucky — he didn’t give a deadline.

Did he know that 20 years later the promise would remain unfulfilled? Perhaps.

One thing is for sure: KERA’s dream, which envisioned the belief that all children can learn at “the highest level,” seems less close to a reality in some ways than when it first appeared in 1990.

A [new Bluegrass Institute report](#) explains that even after 20 years of “reform”:

- Remediation rates for entering freshmen in Kentucky’s universities have hovered between 40 percent and 50 percent throughout the life of the law, reported the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress, called NAEP, shows that only about one-third of Kentucky fourth-graders reach proficiency in reading and math, and the gap widens by the time students reach eighth grade. There, only 25 percent reach proficiency in math and writing.
- Kentucky still doesn’t have a true grasp of how many students actually graduate from high school. Somewhere between 25 percent and 30 percent have failed to graduate every year since

KERA began. In 2006, state Auditor Crit Luallen examined Kentucky's graduation rate data and found it unreliable. And four years later, Kentucky still lacks a reliable way of determining just how many students don a cap and gown.

An adage states, "A goal is a dream with a deadline."

Charter school goals and dreams have come to fruition.

This year, the 107 seniors — all black — at Chicago's all-male Urban Prep Charter School located in Englewood, one of the city's toughest neighborhoods, not only graduated but also have been accepted at four-year colleges. And consider this: only 4 percent of the 107 could read at grade level as freshmen, and the graduation rate for the district's black males sits at approximately 40 percent.

Recently on KET's "Kentucky Tonight," Rep. Carl Rollins, D-Midway, House Education Committee chairman, claimed charter schools "cream the crop," taking only the best students. How exactly is that when only 4 percent of the Chicago charter school's 107 college-bound graduates could read at grade level on their first day as freshmen?

While Kentucky continues to stew, 40 states have put dreams into action: They have charter school laws that hold leaders accountable and challenge at-risk students to ignore claims by some that going to college, succeeding, finding a good job and living the American dream are — for them — only a pipe dream.

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