



School board bandits make off with parents' choice

By Jim Waters

You might be surprised to know it takes even more faith for a creationist like me to expect the current bureaucracy to reform Kentucky's public-education system than to believe the earth, universe, humankind and all life forms happened by accident.

And it takes nearly as much faith to believe Kentucky's schools will improve without giving parents power where it counts — the right to determine which school gets their children to educate and tax dollars to operate.

It's outrageous that some Kentucky parents are now forced to pay tuition in addition to their tax dollars just so they can send a child to a better public school in their own county.

For example, parents who move to the Calloway County School District in western Kentucky and want to send a student to the Murray Independent Schools in the same county must pay for the privilege — \$1,500 in tuition for the first year.

Be clear, these parents don't work long hours to provide tuition for their children to attend esteemed *private* schools. They pay extra to send their children to the *public* school of their choice.

This situation developed when the Calloway school board decided a few years ago to restrict the freedom families had enjoyed for 26 years — with the emphasis on “free.”

Calloway's board decided too many parents were opting to send students to Murray. In one recent year, around 900 students transferred from Calloway to Murray.

Kentucky law requires both school boards involved to sign a transfer agreement before state funding follows students to a different district. If one district — such as Calloway did — doesn't want to play, it can take its ball, go home and snatch freedom away from hundreds of parents.

Calloway's board claimed a need to “balance” the number of transfers. That might hold water if “balance” existed between the districts' academic performances.

On the 2007-08 ACT test, Murray High School ranked No. 22 among the commonwealth's 232 high schools. Calloway's ranking: No. 88. If you could choose, where would you send your child?

Things are even worse for the small Jackson Independent School District in eastern Kentucky.

A few years ago, the Kentucky School Boards Association named Jackson among the Top-10 Most Improved Districts in the commonwealth. But it now faces the possibility of closure because the nearby

Breathitt County Schools want to eliminate options for parents and state funding for transfers that Jackson relies upon.

Not only did Breathitt trash a longstanding transfer agreement, it threatened to deny even the 200 students currently allowed to transfer if the Jackson district tries to attract any new students by allowing parents to pay tuition.

Unless the legislature steps in to resolve the situation, the Jackson district – which has made more appeals than the number of options at a Chinese buffet – could close in a couple of years. This despite Jackson’s 2007-08 ACT Composite Score that ranked No. 28 out of 232 high schools in the commonwealth; only 19 high schools scored lower than Breathitt.

In the spirit of generosity, I’ll ascribe the offending bureaucrats’ actions that fight against parent’s educational liberty to “Hanlan’s Razor,” which states: “Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity.”

The Legislature should do the smart thing by picking this low-hanging fruit and making it clear: Parents may send their children to the public school of their choice.

I promise a shiny red apple for the desk of every lawmaker who does the right thing for Kentucky kids.

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