



## Great strides in the wrong direction

By Jim Waters

The more Kentuckians find out about school choice, the more they like it.

The results of a recent survey commissioned by the Bluegrass Institute and conducted by a team of researchers show that. Dr. Larry M. Caillouet, an associate professor of communication at Western Kentucky University, led the researchers.

And 79 percent of the 493 respondents said parents should have more choices about where their children attend school.

Of course in many ways, asking people if they want more choices is like asking them: “Would you like lower gas prices.” No real surprise comes with a “yes” answer. After all, we all want more choices.

We have choices in nearly every area of our lives. We can shop around for the “best” price and quality when it comes to groceries, automobiles and insurance. We can choose where to dine, what kind of food we want and what we will pay for it.

We even get a choice about what newspaper to read or if you want to get news, information or opinion from another source – by subscription or free.

And what *most* of us understand (I’ll get back to “most” later) is that with more automobile dealerships or cell-phone providers or pizza parlors vying for our support, comes better quality at a better price. That’s because competition ensures that providers must offer quality products and service at the best price if they want to keep customers from choosing a competitor.

In the United States, economic policies creating competition have resulted in prosperity, and in a standard and quality of living that the world envies.

All this leads back to “most” as in: Why do so many people think competition involving the most important resource we have – the education of our children – is a bad thing?

Yes, the results of the survey seem logical, as does competition as a proven way to make all schools better.

But for years, the education “establishment” keeps telling the public that school choice is not needed and will not work. Yet, a solid majority of Kentuckians – 55.3 percent – disagree. They not only favor school choice, but they believe it would improve the quality of public schools.

And politicians largely ignore the majority opinion during the current gubernatorial campaign, while claiming that “our education system has made great strides” – stump-speak that rolls too easily off forked tongues. When they utter this false assessment, rarely does it come with any credible examples.

- They ignore the state’s high-school graduation rates. They are worse today than 17 years ago when the state passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), touted as a standard for the rest of the country. Now 30 percent of our

students do not graduate. Great strides?

- They ignore the state's remediation rates. More than half of entering freshmen at Kentucky's colleges and universities take remedial courses. Great strides?
- They ignore the 2006 Kentucky State Performance Report numbers: 49 percent of black students fall below proficiency in reading compared with only 28 percent of whites. The gaps grow larger in math and science. Great strides?

We've made "great strides" all right but in the wrong direction.

Kentuckians living in the real world and not an ivory tower at the lavish Kentucky Education Association facility in Frankfort see the dismal results.

The Bluegrass Institute survey results show that only 34 percent of respondents believe the state's public-education system improved in recent years. Approximately 40 percent believe the system "stayed about the same." And 26 percent believe the system has "gotten worse."

At first glance, this might not look bad. But beware of first impressions.

With our economy and technology changing at the speed of light, do we really want our students to just tread water?

You and I would say "no."

*– Jim Waters is the director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky's free-market think tank. You can reach him at [jwaters@bipps.org](mailto:jwaters@bipps.org). You can read previously published columns at [www.bipps.org](http://www.bipps.org).*