



Cosmetology on a pig should provide the public a poke

By Jim Waters

The coverup – not the original scandal – always lands “educrats” and their political enablers in the hottest water.

Hiding bad news to save face or prevent temporary political fallout is how a low-level felony “breaking and entering” brought down a presidency.

Despite Halloween’s passing, the ghost of “Tricky Dick” floats throughout Kentucky’s largest school district. The Jefferson County Public Schools and its community enablers – to avoid embarrassment – are engaged in a massive coverup of the truth about academic performance.

The Greater Louisville Project serves as primary enabler. It claims that 90 percent of JCPS students read “at or above grade level.” Yet, the latest state test scores show that more than 40 percent of middle school students in the district are not proficient readers.

The gaps between fantasy created by a group desperate to justify claims of a world-class school district and reality of the latest numbers are even wider in math and science.

During a recent education forum at Jefferson County’s Southwest Government Center, the Greater Louisville Project claimed 81 percent of students performed at grade level last year in math and science. But how? The education department’s own scores show that 59 percent of all JCPS high school students failed to reach proficiency in math and 63 percent scored below proficiency in science.

Fortunately, these enablers cannot erase test scores. If they could, no one could see the truth.

The first step toward fixing Kentucky schools requires accepting that leaders of one of the nation’s 50 largest school districts have become very adept at putting lipstick on a pig.

Kentucky students are placed in one of four categories based on academic performance by using a scale of zero to 140 points – with 100 points the threshold students must reach for proficiency. However, in order to avoid embarrassment for a school district where only 29 percent of its eighth-graders reach math proficiency, Jefferson County schools started identifying students “at grade level” when test scores show them performing in a lower category called “apprentice.”

It gets worse. In its “apprentice” category of performance, the state uses three levels. The lowest level starts at 40 points. This means some Jefferson County students performing at only 40 percent of proficiency (40 points with 100 required for proficiency) are identified by the pig beautifiers as learning “at grade level.”

Talk about Swine Flu. This is sickening.

Hearing no objection from the mayor's office or metro council, should we assume this conspiracy's web is spun high and wide? That depends on the response from local politicians – who benefit from claiming the city offers a world-class education system – even if it doesn't.

How high this goes depends on the response from Frankfort's politicians and bureaucrats entrusted with the leadership of our education system. My "Deep Throat" informs me that the Greater Louisville Project's extremely misleading information is readily endorsed by JCPS Superintendent Sheldon Berman and U.S. Rep. John Yarmuth, D-Louisville.

I'm not seeing black helicopters here. But what I do see – and anyone else can if they take an objective look – is that claiming students performing at only 40 percent of proficiency are "at grade level" does little to move Kentucky away from the precipice of a Third World education system.

Deep Throat also provided a handout from the forum filled with myths about [charter schools](#), including that they "negatively affect financial resources of public schools."

Test Question: If these folks falsely state that students achieving at only 40-percent proficiency are progressing at a pace adequate for competing in the 21st century, why should we believe *any* of their claims – especially those about school choice, which would diminish their control over a failing education system?

Pass the lipstick, please.

— *Jim Waters is director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky's free-market think tank. Reach him at jwaters@freedomkentucky.com. Read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.*