



Bluegrass Beacon BY JIM WATERS

Governor's 'Pride' cannot polish dull school performance

By Jim Waters

The Cincinnati Enquirer reported that Gov. Steve Beshear told the Boone County Education Foundation: “We ought to be proud of what we’ve done. But we ought not to be satisfied with where we are, because we still have a long way to go.”

It’s little more than a politically safe, feel-good statement that provides a bit of something for everyone.

Saying “we ought to be proud of what we’ve done” avoids disturbing defenders of the status quo in Kentucky’s public education system. It also keeps Beshear out of hot water with teachers unions, which write the biggest checks to politicians during elections.

That’s no mystery.

The mystery is what the governor thinks we “ought to be proud of.”

I’m pretty certain it’s not the fact that Kentucky’s white, eighth-grade students’ math performance on the latest [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) (NAEP) is significantly better than only one state, West Virginia.

And this federal assessment, known as “the Nation’s Report Card,” shows Kentucky’s black eighth-graders didn’t do much better, outperforming their counterparts from only two states and Washington, D.C.

If the governor really wants votes, his handlers better not let him talk about “pride” to black parents in Louisville’s West End. Black students comprise more than 30 percent of the students in [Jefferson County](#), the state’s largest school district.

Does he really want to tell them that Kentuckians “ought to be proud”:

- of how black students from low-income families bear the brunt of an educational system that fails to close gaps?
- of a system that allows failing schools to avoid accountability?
- of a system that usually places the most inexperienced teachers in the toughest educational environments, contributing to 50 percent of black male students not graduating?

In reality, Kentucky’s black students and their families have a right to feel more disenfranchised than anyone by the public education entity – a system many of them have always supported, often more strongly than other voting blocs.

Blacks want to believe that Kentucky public schools give kids with strikes against them a chance to step back up to the plate and succeed.

I want to believe that, too.

But how can I when the facts stare at me like an angry pit bull:

- In 1990, black eighth-grade students in no other NAEP-participating state outscored Kentucky's black eighth-graders in math. In fact, Kentucky's eighth-graders got what researchers dub a "statistically significantly higher score" than their counterparts in eight other states.
- By 2009, black students in eight states were outscoring Kentucky's black eighth-graders. Blacks in only five other states did worse.

Compared with other states, Kentucky's blacks lost ground in math under the state's official education policy, known as the [Kentucky Education Reform Act](#) (KERA). When it became law in 1990, KERA promised: all students can learn at the highest level, regardless of zip code, skin color or socioeconomic status.

More than two decades later, most Kentucky students – especially our neediest kids – are not learning what they need. That gets in the way of feel-good statements about our education system.

It appears the governor may have a lot more coins in his campaign war chest than correct facts in his head about Kentucky's academic performance.

Kentuckians could salvage some "pride" if student-performance trends were turning in the right direction in critical areas. However, that's not happening – and more than test scores show it. For instance, the National Center for Education Statistics recently reported that the Bluegrass State's high school graduation rate dropped two years in a row from 2006 to 2008, the latest available data.

Perhaps Beshear should stick with: "We ought not to be satisfied with where we are, because we still have a long way to go."

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