



# The good faces of education shouldn't get a nose job

By Jim Waters

The Kentucky Board of Education thumbed its nose at Gov.-elect Steve Beshear, who wanted to slow down the selection process for a new education commissioner.

Beshear said he thought some good candidates didn't apply because of the contentious gubernatorial campaign. But he overestimates the involvement of politics and underestimates the obstacles to attracting quality candidates created by an education bureaucracy so bloated it can't bend over and touch its toes – a body part unseen for decades.

But the cloud of neglect the board cast on Beshear comes with a silver lining: the clearly diminished power of Kentucky's governor.

Some of the old timers at Al Smith's final "Comment on Kentucky" program, which I attended the other night, bemoan that. They shouldn't.

Back in the day, thumbing your nose at the governor – as a legislator or board member – meant a "perp walk" to the emperor's office, and not to see his new clothes. Rather, it was the political equivalent of a trip to the principal's office.

Kentuckians should relish that the people's representatives no longer have to bow and curtsy to all-powerful governors.

So it's good that the board displayed some independent thinking. But it would have been more commendable had it not also thumbed its collective nose at qualified commissioner candidates. Even if it picks a candidate by the time you read this, it missed many opportunities to get a quality leader.

In the end, the board made a safe pick, choosing Rep. Jon Draud, R-Edgewood, a longtime legislator and former educator.

Draud talks a good talk. For example, he told the Bluegrass Policy Blog that he would consider scrapping the state's incompetent CATS assessment for a better testing program.

Still, by foregoing a wider search for proven candidates, the board missed many opportunities to get a bold leader.

In my book, that's a much bigger deal than ignoring a politician. The stakes – the reform of our education system and the future of young Kentuckians – are much higher than any politician's fleeting tenure.

Thankfully, some – such as Pikeville lawyer Larry Webster – know that.

In a refreshingly blunt article in the Lexington Herald-Leader recently, Webster charged the board with intellectual malfeasance for ignoring Penney Sanders, former director of Kentucky's Office of Education Accountability and commissioner applicant par excellence.

"Every day that goes by without her as commissioner of education is a bad day," he wrote. "The education system of eastern Kentucky, providing mediocre students for our mediocre colleges, is crookeder than a shepherd's stick. But there was one bright time, and that was when Sanders watchdogged the schools."

Webster recalled Sanders, a 25-year veteran of Kentucky's education system and first director of the OEA, as a no-nonsense leader who got results.

"She made school administrators follow the rules, something amazing and encouraging to the country people up here," he wrote. "School officials had not obeyed the law before her and haven't since she left."

And as long as we're fondly recalling the salad days of education, let's recall the good ole days when quality teachers and dedicated principals were backed up by bosses at the central office and parents at home. It's not that way anymore, at least not in Lexington.

The home-office types have pushed out overachieving and underappreciated principal Peggy Petrilli at Booker T. Washington Elementary School, a school created by merging two of the city's worst-performing schools filled with students from low-income families.

Despite leading an academic turnaround, including a meteoric 76-percent rise in math test scores during her short time at the school, she apparently drew the ire of some who preferred the status quo. On top of that, she's received little heartfelt public support from superintendent Stu Silberman about her performance at Booker T.

In her former gig at Lexington's Northern Elementary School, Petrilli demonstrated innovative leadership and determination, which resulted in math scores rising from 39 in 2000 – the year before she took over – to 73.2 in 2005, her final year. The school's CATS Overall Academic Index went from 51.3 in 2000 to 80.2 in 2005.

This turnaround didn't happen at a school with wealthy families and a windfall of resources. Seventy percent of North Elementary's students are either black or Hispanic; 63 percent can get free or reduced-price lunches.

Improving schools mirrors sausage-making. The end result works out, but watching the process can become gut wrenching. Petrilli must have stepped on some toes to get the job done. But that's the point: *she gets the job done everywhere she goes.*

The reward for Petrilli, Sanders and anyone else daring enough to push for excellence in Kentucky's mediocre education system?

The "mediocrats," as attorney Webster opines, thumb their long – and snooty – noses at them.

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