



Education commissioner missed lesson on telling the truth

By Jim Waters

I bet the Kentucky Board of Education hopes the flap over Education Commissioner Barbara Erwin goes away.

It won't, and it shouldn't.

After all, how many companies would tolerate someone misrepresenting his or her career on a mistake-ridden resume in order to secure a job with a salary higher than the governor's?

And this isn't just any company. The Kentucky's education commissioner plays a critical role in the future of every student attending the commonwealth's public schools, regardless of grade.

Most people don't realize it, but many of the key decisions affecting a student's education in Kentucky are not made at the local level. Instead, the real power lies with the commissioner and her minions who issue edicts from the education department's castle atop Mount Frankfort on spending, curriculum, testing, teaching methods and dropouts.

This power includes signing contracts worth millions, among them a contract renewing the state's testing system at an annual cost to taxpayers of \$10 million.

If the commissioner can't even get it right on her resume, should she make crucial decisions about the direction of education or sign off on millions in spending?

On her eight-page resume, Erwin stated that the Texas Association of School Administrators named her "Superintendent of the Year" in 1998. However, the association doesn't have such an award and never did. Erwin called the mistake "a typo."

I doubt it. Don't you?

For many seeking a high-paying job in the private sector, such a fatal mistake would end a candidate's chances, but not for Kentucky's education elite. They hired Erwin and turned a deaf ear to all criticism of their decision.

Erwin also claimed she made an important presentation at a prestigious education conference in Chicago in 2006. But conference officials said she did not. Erwin explained that error away by saying that she signed off on presentations made by others in her district.

Nevertheless, she took the credit for having made the presentation. So what's next, President George W. Bush

wearing a Congressional Medal of Honor simply because one of the troops he commanded earned it?

At the very least, more than enough reasonable doubt exists about Erwin's credibility and the respect she needs to lead Kentucky's education system during a critical juncture.

The board claims it didn't know about most of the errors on Erwin's resume when it announced her hiring. I accept that. But now that it does know, it should act – just like RadioShack Corp.'s board did when it recently accepted the resignation of David J. Edmondson, its president and chief executive officer, who admitted errors on his resume.

Edmondson wrongly claimed to have earned two degrees from a California college. It cost him a job that, including bonuses, paid him more than \$1 million a year.

He rose through the corporate ranks of an internationally known company to become CEO. But his erroneous resume and bad judgment outweighed whatever business accomplishments he piled up in his pursuit of the top job.

RadioShack's board recognized that for whatever success Edmondson achieved, his credibility – believability and trustworthiness – evaporated. Without those, what else matters?

The RadioShack scenario provides a great model for how Erwin – who leads 650,000 students, and their teachers and administrators – and Kentucky's board should handle the current commissioner debacle: Erwin should tender her resignation. The board should accept it and resume its search.

Some might think it's too late. It's not. The board can terminate the contract with a majority vote and 90-day notice.

It's not too late to do the right thing.

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