



Bogus graduation rates plus brittle bill equal failure

By Jim Waters

During the past few years, state education officials added new meaning to the term “rosy assessment” with their hand-slapping, fist-pumping claims that Kentucky’s high school graduation rate now tops 84 percent.

If you believe that more than eight out of 10 Kentucky high-schoolers graduate, I have a bridge over the Ohio River to sell you.

The behavior of “educrats” themselves indicates they don’t believe their own propaganda. Otherwise, why would Gov. Beshear and some lawmakers lament that Kentucky’s dropout problem remains so severe that the state needs a law to force students to stay in school until age 18?

Senate President David Williams, R-Burkesville, responded that such legislation would cost additional millions to create alternative schools for dropout-prone kids.

Another indication of the serious flaw in these artificially high graduation rates – inflated to make the system look good rather than *be* good – is [House Bill 176](#). The legislation is designed to make Kentucky competitive for a \$200-million piece of a \$4.35-billion education-funding pie currently baking in a congressional stimulus oven.

Here’s hypocrisy that even dropouts understand: HB 176 is meant to convince Washington that Frankfort is making bold changes to improve results. Yet, this bill requires outside intervention only in schools failing to graduate more than 60 percent of students for *three consecutive years*.

Sixty percent – a “D-minus” – might be good enough for education elites and teachers unions. But it’s a travesty for 1 million American high school students who drop out of school every year and end up in poverty, crime or desperate circumstances directly related to their lack of opportunity.

Success Performance Solutions, a business consulting firm, called the nation’s dropout problem “a silent epidemic,” and offers these [eye-openers](#):

- Among 16-to-24-year-olds without a high school diploma, four out of 10 are on welfare.
- A dropout is eight times more likely to go to jail than a person with at least a high school diploma.
- The lifetime cost for each high school dropout who later moves into a life of crime and drugs is nearly \$2 million.

Is a bill that only grades this type of failure on such a ridiculously low scoring curve good enough?

Is a bill that purports to offer reform, yet offers no alternatives to a one-size-fits-all system – reforms like charter schools – good enough?

When he announced the “[Race to the Top](#)” program in July, U.S. Education Department Secretary Arne Duncan said that states without charter school laws or that restrict charters will be at a competitive disadvantage when it comes to federal money.

But even before that announcement – in March 2009 – the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported that Duncan said he expects states and school districts to spend incoming stimulus money on true innovation, not the status quo.

We’ll see. HB 176 passed without a single opposing vote in either chamber of the Kentucky General Assembly. Charter schools were not included after the Senate Education Committee deadlocked on the issue.

Will Duncan – a charter school backer – hold fast on this requirement? A couple of [examples](#) why he should:

- Between 2000 and 2006, “Dropout Recovery Charter Schools” were introduced in Ohio. During that time, the Buckeye State’s graduation rate rose from 51 percent in 2001 to more than 79 percent in 2006. Improvements also have occurred during that same time – and with similar schools – in Cincinnati and Cleveland.
- Two Providence, R.I., charter high schools graduated 100 percent (*not* a typo) of their Class of 2008 students, compared with a 61-percent average (not a typo, either) among all the state’s schools.

Unlike Kentucky’s claims, these charter school graduation successes are real.

And they didn’t cost their states additional hundreds of millions, either.

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