



## **Superintendent ‘molds’ his legacy by ignoring a school’s success**

By Jim Waters

Madisonville’s [Hanson Elementary School](#) ranks as one of Kentucky’s top performers among *all* elementary, middle and high schools. It never fails to meet all “No Child Left Behind Act” targets.

Never.

In reading proficiency, Hanson ranks No. 19 out of more than 1,100 schools. Nearly 90 percent of its students reach math proficiency — much higher than the state average. And all this success occurs in [Hopkins County](#) — a school district mired since 2005 in “Tier 3” status, the worst ranking possible.

So why doesn’t Hanson get the “TLC” that a bright light amidst the fog of failure deserves — especially when it comes to facilities?

The circa 1928 school building last saw adequate remodeling in 1982, said Gwen Kik, a parent of four, including a Hanson student.

“The other elementary schools have received renovations, and we have been told we were next in line for years,” Kik said.

She referenced a four-year facilities plan established by a local planning committee in 2007 that placed Hanson as its top priority. Instead, the school board voted to spend \$9 million on a career and technical center.

Parents showed up at an Aug. 16 hearing to protest. They’re not against a tech center, but they believe their children’s health and safety remains a higher priority.

Understandably, they wonder why the district plans to erect a new tech center when one of Kentucky’s best schools houses mold infestations, and “mice, bats and lizards — some dead and some alive,” Kik said.

A [news report](#) on Evansville’s WEHT-TV ABC Channel 25 showed the school’s moldy carpets and missing floor and ceiling tiles.

In the past, flooding in kindergarten classes in the basement forced students to roam the school to use rooms vacated by students whose classes went to lunch or recess.

But let’s face it, a shiny, new tech center in one of Madisonville’s highly visible locations is much “sexier” than ensuring kindergartners have a clean, safe room. It also offers much-greater potential for contributing to the legacy sought by a retiring superintendent.

When TV reporter Julie Krizen asked Superintendent James Stevens why he pushed for a tech center while his top-performing elementary school crumbled, he followed the path of most “educrats” on those rare occasions in which they directly address an education system’s failure: He skirted. He avoided. He punted. Finally, he claimed, “It was a community decision.”

Kik challenges that: “We were not consulted. This is his legacy. He has pushed this tech center and put the pressure on the board.”

There’s no disputing that Stevens’ response to the reporter is simply intolerable.

“I’m going to try to take care of it,” Stevens said. “We’re not going to be able to take care of it all, but we’re going to really address the issues.”

He’s going to try, but somehow he already knows, “We won’t be able to take care of it all.”

Gee, I wonder: Which problems get ignored? Maybe the district can skip fixing the huge holes in the walls, or cracks in the ceilings or foundation?

Some officials claim the district’s \$12 million bonding capacity came up short for building a new elementary school, so they went with the tech center.

Are you kidding me?

What if parents could pull their children out of a moldy, rodent-infested school and put them in a charter school that may not be a Taj Mahal but is clean, safe *and successful*?

This district — along with Kentucky’s entire education system — would become much more concerned about meeting student needs and parent concerns rather than ensuring an educrat’s legacy.

— *Jim Waters is vice president of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky’s free-market think tank. Reach him at [jwaters@freedomkentucky.com](mailto:jwaters@freedomkentucky.com). Read previously published columns at [www.bipps.org](http://www.bipps.org).*