



Awaking from a dream to face an education nightmare

By Jim Waters

I had a dream come true on Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

On Kentucky Educational Television's "["Kentucky Tonight,"](#)" I got to promote [charter schools](#) that promise to free thousands of students trapped in Kentucky's failing schools.

Pastor Jerry Stephenson, minister of inner-city Louisville's Midwest Church of Christ, joined me on the program.

The church, through its after-school [tutoring center](#), helps ensure that poor, black children – many of whom come from homes with a legacy of illiteracy – don't get left behind. This church and a handful of others in Louisville operate after-school programs on shoestring budgets but accomplish more than what Jefferson County Public Schools manage to do with a \$900-million budget.

Also appearing on the KET program was Sharron Oxendine, chief "labor boss" at the state teachers union, and Sheldon Berman, JCPS superintendent.

Berman gets a six-figure, taxpayer-funded salary to ensure the 98,000 students in the commonwealth's largest school district become prepared to further their education and compete in a global, information-age workplace.

But on "Kentucky Tonight," he opposed charter schools, an idea proven to accomplish just that.

Berman berated charters, calling them a "failed reform" in Massachusetts, where he previously worked. He claimed only two Massachusetts charter schools really performed well.

Perhaps he had a "bureaucrat moment." At the very least, he's slightly confused. Berman co-wrote a report on charter schools in Massachusetts and even told the Boston Globe: "What we're saying is it's possible to have public schools and charter schools stand side by side and learn from each other."

Berman's previous honest praise for charters was – and remains – supported by the facts.

The Massachusetts Department of Education [reported](#) that 30 percent of charter schools outperformed schools in same districts in 2005, and the trend for charters was improving.

Berman's flip-flopping – he supported charters before he opposed them – reminds me of one of his fellow Bay Staters who once claimed he was for the war before he was against it.

Berman should stick to the facts.

Instead, he claimed – on the King holiday no less: “The data on charter schools is that it’s truly a failed reform, particularly for African-American students, particularly for low-income students.”

Talk about sacrilege.

Minority students and those who come from low-income households comprise the majority of the 1.5 million enrolled in the 5,000-plus charter schools nationwide. And recent reports show that those heavily minority charter schools outperform regular schools in places such as Boston and New York City.

Many of these students – the kind Stephenson and his fellow ministers help – fall through the cracks of the one-size-fits-all public education system that badly needs to become more than just a tired monopoly that breathes a sigh of relief when real reform gets stymied.

Berman wasn’t the only one with problems the recent KET show.

Oxendine becomes irritated when anyone suggests that her union provides an obstacle to improving public education.

Just the facts, ma’am: The Fordham Foundation **recently reported** that Jefferson County has a “highly restrictive” collective bargaining agreement that “makes it difficult for schools to be nimble, smart, flexible, high-performing organizations.”

That’s a huge obstacle!

In a recent special election to fill the late Sen. Edward Kennedy’s seat, folks in Massachusetts, Berman’s former state, showed they’re willing to shake things up. Perhaps Frankfort’s political leaders will do the same with our state’s education system. Perhaps lawmakers will wise up, ignore fact-challenged “educrats” and pass **charter school legislation**.

It would make another dream come true: Kennedy’s hope that no child – including those in Berman’s district – gets left behind.

— *Jim Waters is director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky’s free-market think tank. Reach him at jwaters@freedomkentucky.com. Read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.*