



Secret success in the digital age

By Jim Waters

One of Kentucky's best-kept secrets is the Barren Academy of Virtual and Expanded Learning.

While the commonwealth loses 10,000 students from each graduating class, only 110 students currently are enrolled in the academy. Nevertheless, [BAVEL](#) offers the right kind of alternative to tip the scales in the other direction.

Not only does it offer all Kentucky students – regardless of where they live – the opportunity to acquire a high school diploma while every single class online, but it's getting top-quality results at very low costs.

Although many academy students once were at-risk of dropping out, BAVEL's 11th-graders scored a 19.0 composite score on the 2011 ACT tests – better than the 18.8 statewide score. Plus, BAVEL does its job for only 37 percent of what it normally costs to educate a Kentucky public-school student.

With such a record, why are so few enrolled in this program?

Obviously, few people really know about BAVEL. That problem can be easily solved with a good communications campaign.

There are signs this already is happening as Kentucky Department of Education leaders begin to line up behind the digital effort.

"We're committed to creating systems that effectively meet the needs of each child," said Dewey Hensley, a new associate education commissioner charged with overseeing efforts to turn around failing schools. "And if you want to provide access to everyone, you have to think innovatively."

You also have to confront the obstacles – head on.

What's always the number-one obstacle when it comes to education, or just about anything else in Kentucky? Money.

When a student transfers from another school district to BAVEL, the academy also receives most of the state-supplied funding designated for that student – less than \$4,000 this year.

But this money only follows the student to BAVEL if the district they want to leave agrees to release them.

Some, apparently, don't want to let go even of students at risk of dropping out.

"BAVEL staff tells us some districts refuse to release students who want to enter their program," said Richard Innes, Bluegrass Institute education analyst and author of a new report on obstacles to digital learning for Kentucky kids. "Obviously, these students are unhappy in their old districts. Refused the right to transfer, some may have become dropouts."

Everyone who claims concern about Kentucky's dropout rates – including Gov. Beshear and First Lady Jane Beshear, who have made this a marquee issue – should agree that denying a young person the chance to transfer to a program that may keep him from dropping out is, as Innes says: “unacceptable.”

A student's home district might lose the SEEK funding for agreeing to a transfer, but the fact is districts don't get *any* funding when a student drops out altogether.

Perhaps it's not really all about the funding. Maybe it is, as Innes thinks: “allowing ‘adult issues’ to trump what's best for kids.”

Eight of BAVEL's students are from Boone County, one of the best-performing school districts in the state. Yet Superintendent Randy Poe told reporters at a [news conference](#) announcing the institute's new report that some courses “may be better learned online” and that digital learning is “changing the face of education.”

If the superintendent of one of Kentucky's best school districts is willing to put the needs of students first, shouldn't officials of failing schools step up – or rather, get out of the way – of kids willing to take this one last shot at an education?

Oh, by the way, BAVEL only gets paid for courses that its students pass.

“No pass, no pay.” Now, there's an excellent compensation program for all public schools.

Read the Bluegrass Institute's entire report, “Digital Learning Now: Obstacles to Implementation in Kentucky,” at <http://www.freedomkentucky.org>.

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