



Big gains in the ‘Big Easy’

By Jim Waters

Although far too few Kentucky 2011 high school graduates were ready for college, our students did [improve](#) their performance on this year’s 36-point ACT college entrance test – going from an overall composite score of 19.4 in 2010 to 19.6 this year.

While 0.2-point improvement is nothing to write home about, it’s a step in the right direction.

However, as often happens when it comes to Kentucky’s educational progress, the good news is tempered. Our small ACT numerical improvement represents baby steps compared to consistently leaps taken by other states.

Kentucky only ranks seventh among the nine states where at least 98 percent of students take the ACT test. Our composite score is [well behind](#) the group’s top performers – Illinois (20.9), Colorado and North Dakota (both 20.7).

Another state that’s not only surpassed Kentucky in recent years but is making bigger strides toward the top of this list is Louisiana. The Pelican State’s ACT score went from 0.6 point behind Kentucky just four years ago to a 0.6 point ahead of us this year – [a 1.2-point swing](#).

How can this be? Southern Louisiana was destroyed by the powerful Hurricane Katrina a few short years ago. How, then, did that state’s students zoom past Kentucky’s in a relatively short time after such destruction occurred?

Possible clues can be found in what happened following Katrina’s sweep through the region on that fateful August day in 2005. As the waters receded, it became apparent that it wasn’t just homes and hospitals that were devastated. Schools were, too.

Worse, thanks to burdensome regulations and many low-performing regular public schools, it looked like many students could lose a complete year of their education.

Enter [public charter schools](#), which quickly – and effectively – stepped up in the emergency.

The region’s education system was rebuilt with many charters in it. Louisiana now has one of the nation’s strongest charter-school programs.

While the DNA of charter schools may not be found at the scene of Louisiana’s improved ACT scores, the circumstantial proof is undeniable – especially when you look at what’s happened in New Orleans, the state’s largest city.

The Christian Science Monitor reports that the number of New Orleans' schools deemed academically unacceptable [fell](#) from 64 percent before Katrina to 42 percent in 2009. Meanwhile, the city's high school graduation rate rose from 50 percent in 2007 to 90 percent in 2010, after its new charter program had taken hold. Today, around 70 percent of all New Orleans' students attend charter schools.

There may be no actual DNA tying charters to improved education performance. But like the lone suspect in the wrong place at the wrong time without an alibi, the question becomes: If he's not guilty, who is?

Expect those committed to defending Kentucky's education status quo to claim they are helpless to succeed with so many poor students.

Louisiana offered no such excuses, even though the number of its students eligible for free-and-reduced cost lunches [rose](#) from 50 percent in 2003 – before Katrina – to 62 percent in 2009 (compared to 47 percent in Kentucky).

Instead, Louisiana schools and teachers got busy making real progress – going from an ACT Composite Score of 19.6 in 2003, when only 80 percent of graduates took the test, to a whopping 20.2 this year, despite all graduates being required to test.

The result: Kentucky is now looking at Louisiana's tail lights.

Given the rather impressive circumstantial evidence, I'd be surprised if an exceptional charter school system doesn't provide a strong clue as to how those Cajuns slipped by us.

In fact, if charter schools are not the major contributor to this change, then what is?

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