



## Bluegrass Beacon BY JIM WATERS

### Education bureaucrats crying ‘poor’ when they fail is really rich

By Jim Waters

The famous Russian researcher Ivan Pavlov discovered “classical conditioning” — dogs would begin to salivate when he rang a bell that signaled the availability of food, even after he stopped giving them food.

Unfortunately, such experiments didn’t remain in labs in what would become a socialist state. It found its way into the free world — particularly our government-run education system.

Say, why don’t we try our own experiment?

Let’s see. How do numerous Kentucky’s school administrators respond to criticism of high dropout rates and low academic achievement performance in their schools? Just like Pavlov’s dogs salivated when the bell rang, despite not getting any food, too many of Kentucky’s education officials yell “poverty” when anyone dares mention such failures – even when the facts prove otherwise.

For example, take the academic-achievement gaps in the [Jefferson County Public Schools](#), Kentucky’s largest school district. Superintendent Sheldon Berman — soon ex-superintendent — actually told a legislative committee in Frankfort that those getting paid big bucks to educate students cannot be held accountable for the gaps “until we eradicate poverty.”

That so surprised one committee member that he exercised rare behavior and spoke up, expressing shock because he thought Berman misspoke. Unfortunately, Berman didn’t.

Meanwhile, his performance as the leader of Louisville schools elicits shock and disbelief.

Gaps between the city’s black and white students in key academic areas continues to increase in over 40 schools — more than one-third of all schools where a large enough black student population allows credible research on the matter. Student populations in these schools disproportionately come from lower-income households.

Blaming poverty for academic failure comes as second nature for public education’s excuse-makers — and not just for overpaid bureaucrats in urban areas. Kentucky offers plenty of poor-performing rural schools, too.

When the [“No Child Left Behind Act”](#) reports came out in December indicating that [East Carter Middle School](#) in Grayson failed to meet its goals for the ninth straight year, it was as if someone rang the bell.

“ECMS Assistant Principal Steve Hicks said that factors like the number of students who receive free or reduced lunches, or those with disabilities, impact the scores in an unfair way,” Leeann Akers reported in the Grayson Journal-Enquirer.

Hicks complained that the report offered “the perception that our school is bad.”

But the evidence suggests reality, not perception.

Even when grading the school on the NCLB law's "curve" — using a technical tool called "confidence intervals" — not a single student group within that school met annual reading goals.

The ["this is because they're poor" explanation just doesn't hold up.](#)

Not only did [West Carter Middle School](#) in the same area reach 100 percent of its goals, other schools have a greater percentage of poor students and yet perform much better.

For example, [Floyd County's Allen Central Middle School](#) passed all of its goals — despite the fact that 70 percent of its students come from low-income households. That's significantly higher than East Carter's 59-percent poverty rate.

Administrators like Berman and Hicks — and a multitude of their brethren — continue to complain about how unfair it is for taxpayers to dare call them on the carpet for their failure.

No one says it's easy to educate anyone, including the poor.

Welcome to the real world.

In fact, the education these children do not get keeps them from getting their ticket out of poverty punched. Yet, these officials shamefully use poverty as a shield against attempts to hold them accountable for failure.

Matthew 26:11 states: "The poor you will always have with you."

I don't question the "Good Book." But if the poor can learn to read, write and do math, the evidence suggests there will be fewer of them.

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