



Guv's education task force nothing to cheer about

By Jim Waters

(BOWLING GREEN, Ky.) – Gov. Steve Beshear missed a golden opportunity to address Kentucky's financial woes. He should have charged admission to his dog-and-pony show disguised as a cheerleading camp for a new [education task force](#).

The traveling circus made its way to 10 cities, including Bowling Green, and for “free admission,” the governor hosted a workshop in cheerleading for education.

“Let's get excited, let's get fired up and let's get on with taking our education system to the next level,” the governor exhorted his minions.

Can't you feel the state's dismal test scores rising? Oh, that's my blood pressure.

You'll forgive me, governor, if I'm having a hard time getting “fired up” about an education system wretchedly failing to educate students at *current* levels of proficiency – much less “taking them to the next level.”

The 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress – the “Nation's Report Card” – shows that 86 percent of black fourth-grade students in Kentucky failed to achieve proficiency in math. In the eighth grade, only 29 percent of white students – 14 percent behind the national average – and 8 percent (that's *not* a typo) of Kentucky's black students achieved math proficiency.

Yet, the governor views the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act as “a stunning success.” Only the best of cheerleading instructors could spin the failure of 92 percent of our at-risk students into “a stunning success.”

That's like calling the 59-0 thrashing the Tennessee Titans took last Sunday a “win.”

After 19 years and billions of dollars worth of [KERA](#), 71 percent of white eight-grade students and 86 percent of blacks in Kentucky failed to reach math proficiency.

Gimme an “U-N-B-E-L-I-E-V-A-B-L-E!”

Between cheering routines, the governor said he wants his new task force “to think outside the box.”

But only a head cheerleader could say that with a straight face when the “task force” comes loaded with the same special interests and elitists who have produced the uninspiring education performance Kentucky suffers from today.

Oh sure, a few token reformists on this commission will attempt to satisfy some voting constituencies. But real reform? Don't count on it.

Unlike a jack-in-the-box, this task force charged with thinking outside the box will produce no surprises – and no smiles on the faces of Kentucky school kids. The only thing popping up here is more of the same. More task forces. More talk. More money. More failure.

Why should we be confident about the prospects for better schools when many of the commonwealth’s education “players” have been around as long as KERA has failed?

Does anyone really think that Education Cabinet Secretary Helen Mountjoy or Brent McKim of the Jefferson County Teachers Association actually want to take the field against frustrated black pastors from low-income communities who have come face-to-face with the results of the failed policies Mountjoy and McKim support every day?

Gimme a “N-O W-A-Y!”

Besides, with so many experts on this panel, why should it take until the end of 2010 before they offer their recommendations for “re-energizing” Kentucky’s education system, as the governor so nicely put it? Apparently, we have yet another year of task forces, talk, money and failure to look forward to.

Gimme an “A-T-T-A-B-O-Y!!”

Meanwhile, when you ask the governor about supporting a successful out-of-the-box (and out-of-our-state) idea that works – charter schools – the governor stops cheering.

He knows Big Labor opposes the idea of allowing public schools to operate independently of stifling union contracts.

“That’s one of the ideas,” Beshear says (less than enthusiastically).

Gimme a “Y-E-A-H, R-I-G-H-T.”

— *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.*