



If the dots add up, an ‘education’ campaign could win

By Jim Waters

Voters won’t choose Kentucky’s next governor until November 2011, but the campaign’s already underway.

Right now, the odds-on favorite remains incumbent Gov. Steve Beshear. Money talks, and he has a lot of it.

Beshear likely will avoid offering controversial solutions to the commonwealth’s most pressing problems. Plus, unless there’s major scandal, Kentucky voters have short memories. So the sting of Beshear’s disastrous, risk-free performance during this year’s budget session in Frankfort likely will have worn off.

It’s unknown how much the TEA Party’s aggressive agenda against government growth, overspending and failure — primarily at the national level — will impact state races. If the movement continues its present momentum, then big-government liberals such as Beshear and much of the Louisville contingency in the legislature could be in for a fight.

Also, the early entrance of charter schools advocate (and former Bluegrass Institute board member) Phil Moffett, a Louisville businessman, offers the possibility of making this campaign about an issue more difficult for voters to overlook or ignore: education.

Voters might forget bungled budget sessions that last only 60 days every other year (or should). However, the poor performance of Kentucky schools — open 177 days each year — should not get cast aside as easily. Since economic issues usually rate highest at the ballot box, challengers who can tie a failing public-education system to voter pocketbooks may succeed.

Kentuckians have heard so much about the commonwealth’s [low educational rankings](#) through the years that they have almost become inoculated against catching a fever for change. Instead, voters need candidates — TEA party or others — who connect the dots concerning what a failing education system means for Kentucky’s economic future. Here is some dot-connecting to consider:

- Federal and state government data shows that more than [786,000 Kentucky students](#) who passed through the eighth grade since the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act did not achieve proficiency in math skills needed for success.
- This means those students will struggle if or when they try to further their education.
- That is why only one out of four Kentuckians has a two- or four-year college degree.
- That means that every year Kentucky fails to improve its education system, its students move closer to the precipice of a failing economic future.

“The jobs of the future are not going to be the jobs of your father,” Education Commissioner Terry Holliday recently told the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce.

Holliday, citing a Georgetown University report, said Kentucky is on the way to becoming a “third-tier state,” meaning the jobs available when the economy recovers will not be the high-paying jobs seen in other states or countries with an educated workforce.

“If we don’t have the high-paying jobs in Kentucky employment, that impacts the economy,” Holliday said.

But breaking through to voters on this issue requires offering viable solutions – a tough task considering staunch defenders of the status quo, including teacher unions and their legislative pals, have developed a real talent for making failure sound good and sound policy appear extreme.

For example, despite the fact that [charter schools](#) have thrived for 20 years and have grown to 5,000 strong with an enrollment of 1.5 million students nationwide, teacher union boss Sharron Oxendine referred to them as a “new radical idea” on a recent “Kentucky Tonight” program.

The best evidence suggests that low-performing students who remain in charters begin to outperform their traditional public-school peers after three years. This is nothing short of impressive, considering many of these children are minority, low-income students who arrive at charter schools already far behind.

Admittedly, such improved educational results would be a “radical” change for many Kentucky schools and students.

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