



‘Super’ evaluations ignore the facts about Kentucky schools

By Jim Waters

“The buck stops here,” stated the famous sign on former President Harry Truman’s desk.

But where does the “buck” stop when it comes to Kentucky’s public education system performance?

Which superintendents and local school boards would accept that kind of responsibility for a system where 511 schools — more than 44 percent of all Kentucky schools — failed to make the most basic levels of improvement to achieve “Adequate Yearly Progress in 2010” required by the [“No Child Left Behind Act.”](#)

Apparently, not many, considering that 114 Kentucky school districts failed to make “AYP” last year.

[An open records project](#) by the Bluegrass Institute during the past year reveals a surprising pattern of ignoring academic performance in local school board evaluations of superintendents — a district’s highest-paid education leader.

One of America’s straightest shooters, Mark Twain, put that behavior in perspective:

“In the first place God made idiots,” Twain said. “This was for practice. Then He made school boards.”

My colleague Logan Morford, who led the project, said that the evaluations he reviewed fall far short of the kind of objective reviews needed to improve Kentucky schools.

“Private sector job evaluations are usually based on measurable, quantifiable results,” Morford said. “We aren’t seeing that in superintendent evaluations. What we do see are favorable evaluations in districts falling short of even the most basic standards year after year.”

Another troubling aspect of these evaluations: Along with the “warm fuzzies” offered by naïve board members, salary increases often accompany the evaluations in failing districts. Many superintendents already haul in six-figure paychecks.

Truman hailed from Missouri, the “Show-Me State.”

Show me how many chief executive officers in the private sector get favorable evaluations and raises when a significant portion of their operation fails?

Yet, school boards throughout Kentucky often render [evaluations](#) that lack detail, contain no mention of goals or metrics and at the same time, offer rave reviews and high praise — and even excuses for lack of progress.

Sheldon Berman, superintendent for Jefferson County Public Schools — the state’s largest district — recently got high marks from his board. Yet, 41 of the district’s schools — nearly one-third of the entire district — failed to make “AYP” in 2009.

Still, Berman landed a \$267,800 paycheck while the board praised him for being “an engaging public speaker” and for maintaining good relations with the local teachers union. To its credit, the board recently re-evaluated Berman’s performance and decided not to renew his contract.

Perhaps some school boards in smaller Kentucky communities should do the same — unless they want their schools to replicate the “education” center that produced Truman’s famous sign: a federal reformatory.

A good place to start: Carter County. Superintendent Darlene Gee’s 2009 evaluation indicated she “meets expectations” without even a hint that the district’s academic performance wallows in disrepair. What will her evaluation look like next time, especially now that the Kentucky Department of Education tagged Carter County as one of the state’s 13 persistently lowest-performing districts?

Check out the Carter County board’s summary statement on the front page of Gee’s evaluation, which I have not edited for grammar or punctuation: *“You are doing a good job like the fact you attend so many school and visit classrooms the community notices this too and Have made several Good comments to this fact.”*

The Knox County board’s evaluation of its superintendent, Walter Hulett, made no mention of the fact that only 15 percent of the district’s high school juniors met ACT benchmark scores during the 2009-10 school year. Hulett’s only “weakness,” stated the board’s evaluation — written in incomplete, handwritten phrases — was that Hulett was “too trusting.”

Perhaps Kentucky school boards trust superintendents too much.

It’s time they follow another great president’s admonition: “Trust, but verify.”

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