



## Frankfort's education song an 'oldie' but not 'goodie'

By Jim Waters

Someone once told hit songwriter Steve Goodman that no one could craft the perfect country song unless it included "mama, trains, trucks, prison and gettin' drunk."

So Goodman added this verse to a song he already wrote:

"Well, I was drunk the day my mom got out of prison  
And I went to pick her up in the rain.  
But before I could get to the station in my pick-up truck  
She got runned over by a damned old train."

Similarly, Kentucky's efforts to reform education won't work unless lawmakers move beyond throwing more money at a system that already fails to adequately prepare way too many students.

Still, you can bet your next expanded-casino dollar that most of what passes for education reform from Frankfort's politicians during the next legislative session will be dominated by demands for more funding. This despite the fact that of the \$18.7 billion budgeted for state spending in 2009-10, Kindergarten-12 education gets \$3.8 billion and \$3.9 billion — 42 percent and 41 percent, respectively, *of the entire general fund*.

Kentucky's mamas want to know: "Where's all that money going?"

With billions getting handed to public education, why must teachers dig into their own pockets to purchase supplies so students can keep learning?

Edutopia.org conducted a survey recently, asking teachers who visited the Web site: "How much do you spend out of pocket each year on classroom supplies?" One respondent wrote that she spends "\$700 give or take, plus my husband's and the parents' free time."

University of Kentucky economists are taking a more precise and less anecdotal look at spending than Edutopia.org. They soon will complete a report on the state's education-spending habits. It may claim we need to spend more. But I'll be surprised if it doesn't also indicate that education dollars already appropriated could get used more effectively.

Even if it turns out that Kentucky needs to spend more on education, those who repeat that mantra *ad infinitum* without acknowledging other solutions should lose credibility.

Teachers unions and their political pals in Frankfort — most residents of the House of Representatives so long they've lost touch with the real world — stand among the loudest opponents of any change in the system that would hold schools and teachers accountable. They pooh-pooh ideas such as merit pay for teachers.

What other professions reward employees based on how long they manage to hang around rather than their performance? And how many competent professionals have passed up going into a profession – as they have teaching – because so little financial reward comes for performing well?

The city of Denver created its “ProComp” model, which paid participating teachers based on how they performed as indicated by student test scores, attendance and yearly improvement. Significant learning gains occurred among student of these participating instructors, and eight times – *eight times* – as many teachers now apply for jobs in Denver’s worst schools.

Don’t tell me incentives work in every sector of our society, except education. I’m not buying if that’s what you’re selling.

It wouldn’t cost the state of Kentucky a single dime more to appropriate current education dollars in a way that encourages accomplished professionals to choose the worst schools, and to pay outstanding teachers of math or science (we need those) more than history or English teachers (we have plenty).

Yes, it takes money to educate our kids. But money without accountability is like writing a country song without “mama, trains, trucks, prison and gettin’ drunk.”

Put another way, you couldn’t write the perfect ditty about public education in Kentucky without “spendin’, more spendin’, low scores in readin’ and figurin’, and gettin’ taxed ‘till you feel like you done got run over by a train.”

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