



# Bluegrass Beacon

BY JIM WATERS

## **The 'blindsided' leading the blind**

By Jim Waters

The Bluegrass Institute released a new education report this week focusing on gaps between whites and blacks in Louisville, the state's largest school district.

It's not pretty.

The report shows the gap in academic performance between white and black students in math and reading not only remains, but is widening at more than one-third of the study's 120 schools.

Serious graduation-rate gaps also exist between blacks and whites.

Black males in just five of 19 high schools studied graduated at a rate equal to or greater than the statewide rate of only 63.1 percent for black males.

Try this test question: "What does the future hold for most diploma-less black males?" A. Life on the streets B. Drugs C. Prison D. Worse E. All of the above

The Justice Department reports that 75 percent of all state prison inmates are high-school dropouts. A disproportionate number are black men. Of all black male dropouts in their early 30s, 53 percent have found their way to prison.

To their credit, a group of Louisville's black pastors and civil-rights leaders are concerned enough to step up.

These aren't the spineless elitists at the NAACP or Urban League, or lifeless church leaders who profess concern about problems but let someone else do the work. While others display needed courage, these loafers often accept credit – after the fact – for successful resolutions.

Dedicated pastors who struggle to raise money to provide after-school tutoring for black children left behind have stepped up.

Leaders like Louisville Pastor Jerry Stephenson, chairman of the Values Coalition

U.S.A., understand the cultural and political obstacles involved in reforming public education beyond throwing more money at the system.

"This challenge will not come without a great fight from those forces that want to keep the status quo," Stephenson said. "But we are up to the challenge and we won't turn back. The life of our children is at stake."

In responding to the report, Jefferson County Schools' research director Bob Rodosky claimed the district, which enrolls nearly half of all black public-school students in Kentucky, was "blindsided" by the Bluegrass Institute's report.

Forgive me if I don't offer a hanky, Bob. You have part of it right. You and others have turned a "blind" eye toward implementing real solutions that would go a long way toward improving the education of poor, black kids in your inner city.

Twenty-three of the 35 "Tier 5" schools in Kentucky — schools failing to meet annual education goals for at least six consecutive years — operate in Jefferson County. Ten Jefferson County middle schools alone fall into the "Tier 5" category.

And administrators chant "blindsided?"

Rodosky accused the Bluegrass Institute of "piling on" and attempting to paint the district "in the worst light possible."

"We already knew about" those cavernous achievement gaps, he said.

Rodosky was "blindsided" yet "already knew?"

Interesting.

Parents who care and community members who want to help improve these schools deserve to know the seriousness of the problems and what specific steps are planned by the district to turn them around.

They deserve some "choices" when it comes to education in this state.

I've offered many ideas in this column — more transparency, bringing best practices from good to struggling schools, merit pay for badly needed, high-quality math and science teachers — and more choices for parents.

Educrats don't seem overly enthusiastic about those options — even though they enjoy large helpings of success in other school districts across the nation.

Perhaps they have better ideas — beyond telling parents to keep their mouths shut and their checkbooks open. I'd like to hear them.

Wouldn't you?

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