



Better test scores ‘Easier’ done than said

By Jim Waters

During the past week, Kentucky’s education report card took more hits.

First, the [latest ACT college-entrance test scores](#) show a favorite adage of Kentucky education watchers remains apropos: “Thank God for Mississippi.”

Kentucky’s overall composite score — including all public, private and home school students — remained stuck at 19.4 for the second straight year.

The only reason the overall score didn’t drop? Private and home school students experienced the greatest score increase in history. Their composite rose from 22.3 last year to 23 this year. Otherwise, there might not have been any state for which to thank the “Almighty.”

Kentucky’s “educrats” often blame failure to improve test scores on the fact that all students must now take the ACT. Scores get dragged down when everyone tests, they whimper.

But author Catherine Pulsifer offered appropriate advice when she admonished: “Fix the problem, not the blame.”

At one time, blaming failure on higher participation rates might have held water. But now, more states require most kids to test, leveling the playing field.

Of the eight states with at least 96 percent of students taking the ACT this year, Kentucky finished ahead of only one – yep, that one. Meanwhile, Illinois, Colorado, Louisiana, Wyoming, Michigan and Tennessee all had high participation rates – and significantly higher scores.

See? It *can* happen.

The improved showing among Kentucky’s non-public students offers stark contrast to that of public school students, whose scores actually fell from last year.

But that’s not the only thing that’s gone down lately. Kentucky’s “Race to the Top” application dropped like the jaws of the union-backed bureaucrats who filed it when they got the news.

So, [Kentucky gets none of the \\$3.4 billion](#) in federal money for schools bestowed on nine other states and the District of Columbia, which has those dropping jaws playing the blame game. But they won’t impugn the most disingenuous player in the failed effort: the state teachers union.

Without question, the union offers the chief obstacle to genuine education reform.

What other conclusion can reasonable thinking Kentuckians reach when the union is willing to deny our state \$175 million — Kentucky’s stake in the “Race to the Top” competition — during economically rough times just to keep charter schools out.

Sharron Oxendine, Kentucky Education Association president, must be feeling the heat. She's now telling reporters her union "offered" to work on issues related to charter schools but was rebuffed.

That's not what Oxendine indicated on KET's "[Kentucky Tonight](#)," when she labeled charter schools "a radical new idea" and accused charters of "allowing just a very narrow group of students to benefit."

Such claims would be news to President Obama, who consistently emphasizes support for charters — one of the brighter spots in his presidency — and a must for states wanting "Race to the Top" money.

The performance of charter schools also has been a [bright spot in Louisiana](#) following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

Before Katrina, Kentucky consistently outperformed Louisiana on the ACT by a wide margin. But even before hurricane winds started blowing, Louisiana was starting to turn the corner by taking over some of New Orleans' habitually failing schools.

Following Katrina, the takeover process dramatically accelerated.

There were "unprecedented numbers of charter school authorizations in the hope that the entrepreneurial spirit of charter operations would be equal to the tremendous rebuilding task required," said education researcher Dick Innes.

Yes, it's been a bad week for ACT scores and charter schools in Kentucky. But it's been just the opposite the past few years in The Big Easy, where — coincidentally or not, you decide — a dramatic increase in charter schools accompanied solid ACT progress that has Louisiana thanking "The Big Guy" for Kentucky and lots of other states.

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