



## **Commish Search II: The Sequel**

By Jim Waters

Al Smith, longtime host of “Comment on Kentucky,” urged the Kentucky Board of Education to wait and conduct a national search for a new education commissioner – like other states do.

Gov.-elect Steve Beshear also requested the board take some more time.

Their pleas fell on deaf ears.

The board’s haste – along with the insipid candidates it has attracted – confirms Solomon’s reckoning that: “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be.”

The board’s most recent search process offered the same secretive proceedings that resulted in an embarrassing fiasco earlier this year that led to a superintendent from Illinois, Barbara Erwin, getting hired. She quit before working a single day because the media reported on her faulty resume, which led to an uproar.

But the board got a new chairman – and a rare second chance to get it right.

I (naively) hoped the board’s new chairman, Joe Brothers, an Elizabethtown plant manager, really meant what he said to reporters: “I have no agenda, other than the kids of Kentucky.”

Not a single aspect of the board’s second opportunity to do some good offers any evidence that a new day awaits “the kids of Kentucky.” In fact, Kentuckians have again been left largely in the dark throughout much of the process. The finalists became known only recently.

Yet, Brothers told reporters “the board wants the public and the media to help vet the candidates to avoid the problems it had with the last search.”

But it’s not just “the problems with the last search” that demand this board’s attention. Rather, what’s needed is what this board seems determined to avoid: a proven tough leader determined to put students first by changing Kentucky’s education system.

We need someone willing to accept whatever collateral damage to the bureaucracy such an approach causes. I don’t see any evidence of such commitment in the current crop of candidates.

Kentucky’s taxpayers and parents should be outraged that this board spent \$50,000 on a search firm that gave us a commissioner that doesn’t even know how to use spell-check. But they should be even more incensed that the board entrusted with the leadership of our education system continues to place the self-interests of bureaucrats and politicians in Frankfort above the future of our children.

Instead of commissioner candidates with proven courage to fight for aggressive change, go-along, get-along

legislators and other non-descript bureaucrats applied for the job.

Bureaucrat Susan Weston described Rep. Jon Draud, one of the leading candidates, as “a collaborative person.”

Inspiring, isn't it?

Another candidate, Kentucky-native-turned-Florida education bureaucrat Jim Warford, told reporters he would consider it “a professional honor” and that he wanted to “continue the education reforms under way in Kentucky.”

Warford apparently doesn't see the need to radically change a system that even the pro-establishment Kentucky Long-Term Policy Research Center reports dwells among the bottom third of states in academic achievement.

Warford's intention to “continue the education reforms under way in Kentucky” sounds like “more of the same” to me. It sounds like miniscule improvement, grading on big curves and placating labor bosses at the plush teachers-union building near Frankfort's Capitol.

He's also made it known that he opposes school choice. Warford told the St. Petersburg Times that he blamed vouchers and charter schools for “undermining our public schools” in Florida.

Why is the board even considering a leader who believes that giving parents choices “undermines” public schools?

Kentucky's taxpayers and parents shell out \$4 billion to support our state's schools each year. *They more than anyone have a vested interest in seeing schools succeed.* And they understand that competition works.

As was the case with the first round of searching for a new commissioner, Kentuckians have heard very little from “Commish Search II: The Sequel” candidates about important issues.

For example, why have commissioner candidates ducked the issue of the widening achievement gap between black and white students?

Why aren't we hearing from them about offering plans for merit pay to provide sorely needed incentives to keep and hire good teachers, while weeding out poorly performing ones?

Why aren't these candidates offering specific plans for improving Kentucky's graduation rates, which now are lower than when “education reform” began in 1990?

Solomon knows why.

*Jim Waters is the director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky's free-market think tank. You can reach him at [jwaters@bipps.org](mailto:jwaters@bipps.org). You can read previously published columns at [www.bipps.org](http://www.bipps.org).*