



Governor's dropout proposal falls short of graduating

By Jim Waters

Gov. Steve Beshear told reporters in 2009, "I'm not sure we can afford" to force students to remain in high school until age 18.

That was then. This is now – an election year in which Beshear could use an issue that pulls on the emotional heartstrings of voters, most of whom pay little attention to policy decisions and even less to what they cost.

But why worry about a policy's cost or whether claims about success are rooted in reality when there's an election to win? After all, if payment falls due after the vote, the chance to hold politicians accountable fades like the memory of voters.

To help with the emotional pull, the administration sent first lady Jane Beshear to testify before the House Education Committee. Hoisting Kentucky's [dropout age to 18](#) has become her *cause extraordinaire*. After all, who's going to ask the first lady tough questions about things like cost or whether her cause has succeeded elsewhere?

The lawmakers on that committee deferred on those important questions.

They knew that asking the first lady questions she can't answer comes with little political gain. They politely refused to press Jane Beshear on specifics to support her claim that forcing kids to stay in school when they've already mentally dropped out is "integral to the futures of our young people."

Supporters of the dropout law have the mistaken notion that such coercion will result in a great improvement in the number of those students getting high school diplomas and conquering the world.

It doesn't take much intellectual rigor to figure out that high school graduates earn more than those without diplomas. But while all of us *want* kids to stay in school, that doesn't mean government mandates can [change the minds of teens who give up on school](#).

In 2009, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy in Massachusetts examined data available up to 2005 and found that "age 18" laws were ineffective, at best. The Bluegrass Institute examined even more recent data and found:

- Only five of the 15 states with "age 18" laws improved graduation rates notably compared with the national average between 2001 and 2007.
- Graduation rates in six of those "age 18" states and the District of Columbia actually declined.

A recent analysis by the nonpartisan Legislative Research Commission confirms that a coercive law would guarantee no better results in Kentucky. The commission reported that 33 percent more students dropped out at 18 years old in the 2008-09 academic year than left school at age 16.

So claims by the first lady and her supporters that it would work just don't add up.

What would add up is cost:

- A fact-based analysis — not the imaginary numbers provided by the Kentucky Department of Education and questioned by a state audit — reveal an additional 11,400 kids would be added to the system. This would cost \$41.7 million just in additional Support Education Excellence in Kentucky money, called SEEK.
- Extra federal and local education tax levies could add \$100 million more.
- Furthermore, a Bluegrass Institute analysis shows that the additional buildings required could cost as much as \$150 million — on top of the \$100 million worth of federal and local education tax levies.
- And no one has tried to even calculate the cost of hiring additional teachers and paying their health care and pension benefits.

The good news here for taxpayers is that the graduation-rate mandate suffered the same fate as the governor's expanded-gambling proposal: It went nowhere.

The bad news for the governor is that he still hasn't found a campaign issue that makes folks feel all warm and tingly about his leadership.

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