

# KERA'S 20 YEAR PLAN



- spend more money
- violate the chain of command
- build on a faulty foundation
- get lost in the matrix
- life sized lady bugs
- feelings of inadequacy
- lower expectations
- spin until you're dizzy
- children paying union dues

a BLUEGRASS INSTITUTE report  
'KERA@20: LESSONS LEARNED'  
by Jim Waters BIPPS.ORG

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# ***KERA@20: Lessons learned***

*By Jim Waters*

## **The beginning**

**Political leaders eager for first-class public schools had high hopes that the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) would raise the commonwealth out of the mire of academic failure.**

**However, after 20 years, the vision of KERA remains dim and its promise of great change largely unfulfilled as Progressive educators steered Kentucky's education train in the direction of faulty fads and failed programs.**

- Folks lauded the fantasy of KERA's greatness.
  - Judges lectured about how the Progressive Education path would lead to a superb educational experience for Kentucky's children. Their courts rendered decisions forcing KERA upon already overburdened taxpayers and anxious teachers. Included were a multitude of new taxes, unproven education theories and burdensome regulations.
  - Education reform could only happen, they claimed, with bigger wads of cash for poor districts and feel-good policies – like eliminating grade levels to “reduce the stigma of failure at an early age.”
- Concerned taxpayers and conscientious legislators were shocked that such a radical and untested experiment in public education could so quickly be deemed successful or that concerns of the cautious would be so deliberately dismissed.
- Opposing voices were squashed as the KERA wrecking ball bounded down the media mountain at full steam. Kentucky's Progressive politicians, who controlled the General Assembly, moved at breakneck speed following the *Rose v. Council for Better Education* decision rendering Kentucky's entire education system unconstitutional to the passage of KERA.
  - When KERA was passed by the legislature, not only did Kentucky's House of Representatives approve the Senate's version without even sending the bill to a conference committee – an unusual move designed to limit public dissent – but it voted on KERA “with no debate” on the House floor.
  - When then-Rep. John Harper of Shepherdsville rose to explain his vote opposing KERA, he wasn't even afforded recognition by House Speaker Don Blandford, who later went to prison for accepting bribes.
  - Limiting debate and squashing dissent in the beginning of KERA was not only the modus operandi for Kentucky's Progressive Educators – who had a firm grip on the system (just as their political counterparts who controlled the legislature). Limiting expression of viewpoints

was a hallmark in the fights that were to come over KERA's untried experiments and disastrous testing systems.

- The media didn't seem to care much for opposing views, either.
  - Media accounts of KERA were exceedingly unbalanced; accounts often were published without a single quote from KERA opponents.
  - Even now, newspaper accounts of education developments often offer little more than the view of education bureaucrats.
  - Also, education reporters at the state's largest media outlets were loathe to include dissenting voices – especially on more controversial issues. Though doing so would better serve their readers, upsetting their sources within the education system makes their jobs more difficult. Progressive bureaucrats in the education system have a history of making life difficult for out-of-favor reporters.
  - Some improvement in education coverage – including more complete coverage of issues – has occurred in more recent times. Still, many education issues today can only be fully understood through an increasing number of blogs and Web sites cropping up to fill the newspaper-information void.
- Overall, the KERA fairy tale resulted in many unhappy endings for children.
  - A Bluegrass Institute analysis using National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) figures indicates that since KERA became law, around three-quarters of a million Kentucky children – equal to approximately one-fifth of the state's entire population – left middle school with inadequate math skills.
  - Also, as discussed below, somewhere between one out of three and one out of four Kentucky students have failed to graduate from high school every single year since KERA's enactment, with indications from federal officials that the state's high school graduation rate is in decline.

## **KERA the unstoppable**

***Eighty-eight of Kentucky's 138 legislators voted for KERA. The momentum – and praise – for KERA were unstoppable.***

- The ink from Gov. Wallace Wilkinson's pen had barely dried after signing House Bill 940 into law before Frankfort's leading – mostly Progressive – politicians were praising the legislation as one of Kentucky's greatest accomplishments.
  - Wilkinson declared KERA ***“the most important piece of legislation since the signing of the (Kentucky) constitution.”***
  - One eastern Kentucky politician, House Majority Leader Greg Stumbo, currently House Speaker, asserted KERA ***“will move Kentucky from last to first.”*** In an emotional speech urging passage of KERA, Stumbo declared that ***“no child in Kentucky will ever have to look***

***back and say that he or she didn't receive the full educational opportunity that he or she is entitled to by the Constitution of this state.*** He received a standing ovation.

- Senate President Pro Tem John “Eck” Rose of Winchester hailed passage of KERA ***“as significant as the first passing through the Cumberland Gap,”*** through which many explorers and settlers originally arrived in Kentucky.
- Robert Sexton of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence was “ecstatic,” calling the signing of the bill ***“a historic beginning.”*** Sexton called KERA ***“the most thoughtful and sweeping reform program imaginable.”***
- The state’s powerful teachers' union wasn’t about to get left out, either.
  - Shortly before filing a lawsuit to prevent KERA’s stipulation prohibiting school employees from campaigning for school-board candidates, Kentucky Education Association president David Allen called it ***“a strong package for teachers and kids”*** for ***“one of the best systems in the nation.”***

## Beyond Kentucky

### ***KERA elation extended far beyond Kentucky’s borders***

- **KERA was hailed nationwide as a model for educational magic.**
  - Even if it wasn’t the *best* education reform effort, it *was*, as Sen. Robert Nelson Allen from eastern Kentucky’s 18<sup>th</sup> district cooed, ***“the first in the nation”*** – a fact that did not escape Progressive educators and their sympathizers in the legislature desperate for some good news about their efforts, which had been battered by failing schools and angry parents.
  - ***“Kentucky was the first case when anybody attempted to do systemic change and do a lot of it at once,”*** said Frank Newman, president of Education Commission of the States, a Denver-based nonprofit research and policy organization. ***“When people discuss reform, it’s the model that always comes up.”***<sup>1</sup>
  - Considering the fact that teachers’ unions would benefit from KERA’s huge shift of power to teachers and away from the administrators who are school districts’ management experts, it’s not surprising then that Albert Shanker, American Federation of Teachers president, claimed KERA was ***“the most intelligent state reform plan that’s been adopted anywhere in the country.”***<sup>2</sup>
  - Even former President Bill Clinton got in on the act. Clinton visited Kentucky at the conclusion of KERA’s first decade because he wanted ***“to show America how a whole state can identify and turn around its low-performing schools.”***<sup>3</sup>
- One doubts that even Thomas Edison would have been so quick to deem his experiment a resounding success – at least not until a switch was actually flipped and some results occurred!
  - Yet Kentucky’s leaders christened the education experiment known as KERA a marvelous triumph before it even was implemented.

- Before a single student had gone from failure to success in Kentucky’s schools, Sexton declared: *“it’s time to celebrate.”*

Powerful politicians claimed a legacy, their public policy allies considered themselves vindicated for all their hard work and the complacent media felt validated in propagandizing a justified “end” with questionable “means.”

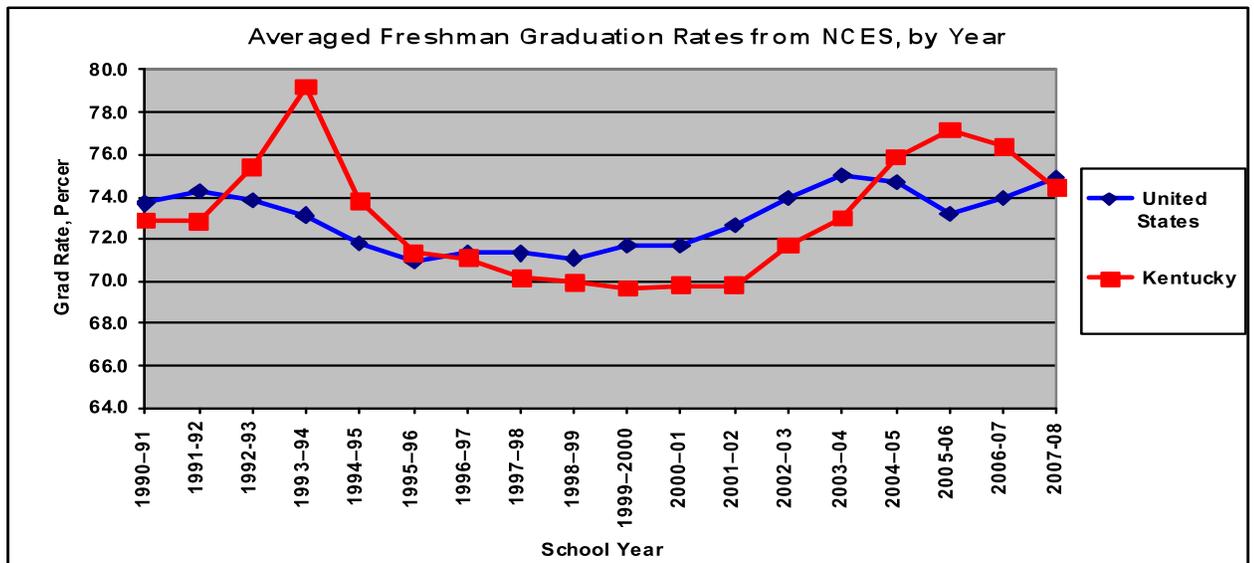
And so the “celebration” was on.

## Facts over fantasy

But the euphoria quickly faded. Like gangrene, reality started to set in. Fixing a broken education system requires more than platitudes, pie-in-the-sky promises and excessive spending to repair.

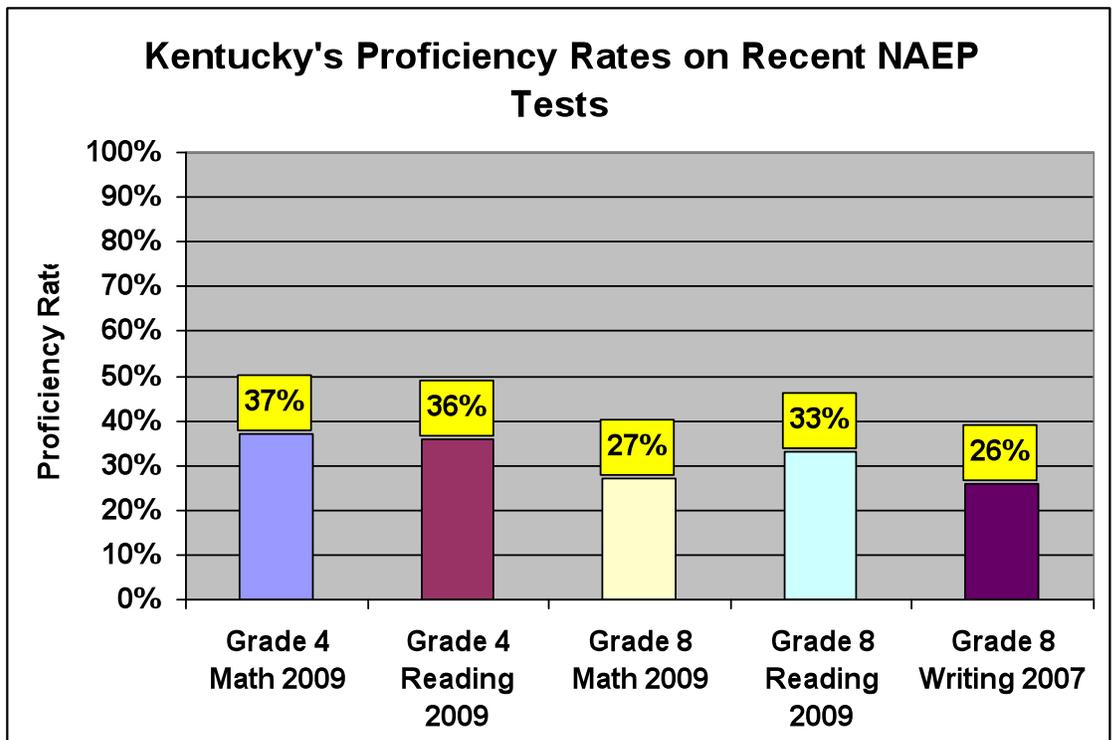
- As evidence of KERA’s problems started to mount, politicians and bureaucrats began defending small, mostly insignificant, improvements. After all, they had to justify big political victories, not to speak of a mammoth amount of additional spending.
  - Throughout KERA’s tenure, Kentucky’s leaders have largely been living in denial about failing test scores, grim college-remediation rates, high dropout rates with correspondingly low high school graduation rates – and little progress toward improvement in these areas.
    - One early danger signal was a nagging decline in Kentucky’s high school graduation rates. Around the time that KERA’s impacts really started to show in our high schools in 1993-94, federal data show Kentucky entered an extended period of declining graduation rates. By 1997, it had fallen below the national average.
    - Today, the same federal data show high school graduation rates are notably lower than the 80 percent-plus figures claimed in recent years by the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE). Plus, in the most recent two years of federal data, the Kentucky high school graduation rate actually declined, again falling below the US average. In fact, federal data shows Kentucky’s high school graduation rate hit its peak back in 1994 and has never risen higher in any year since. **More than one in four Kentucky students now fails to graduate from high school.**

Figure 1<sup>4</sup>



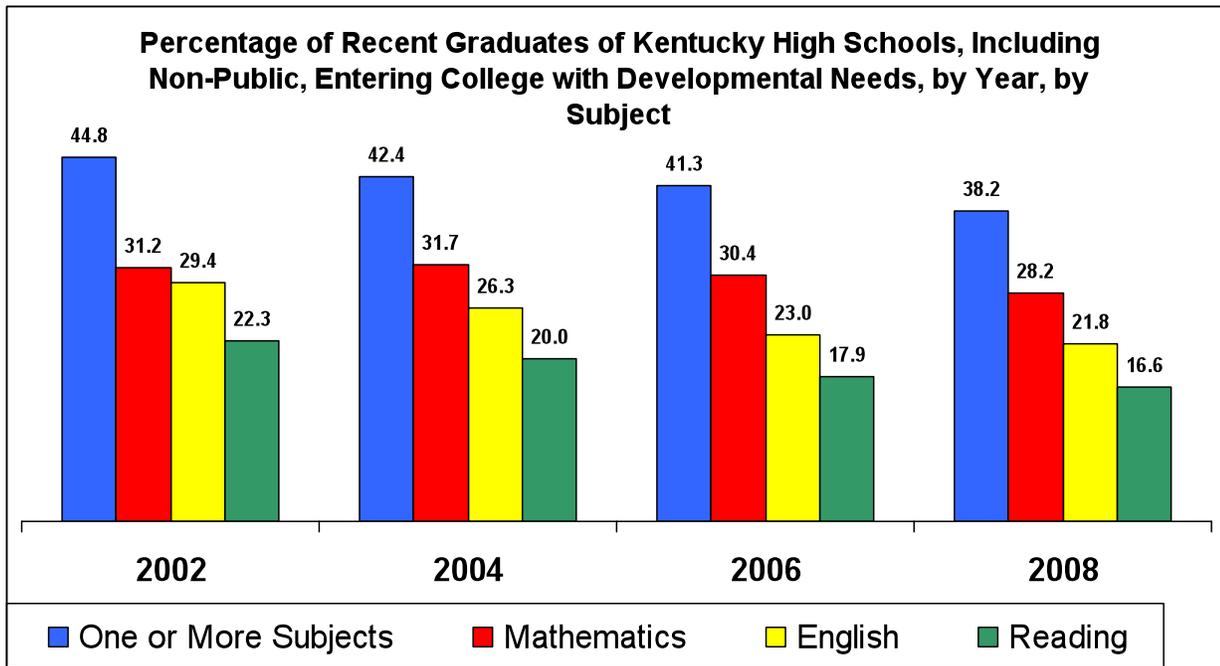
- Their claims that “we’ve made **substantial** progress” never get supported with facts. The reason? Credible data tell very different stories.
  - **After two entire decades of KERA, only about one in three Kentucky fourth-graders are proficient readers and mathematicians.**
  - **Even worse, by the time those fourth-graders reach Kentucky’s middle schools, only one in four are proficient in math, and only a similarly low percentage writes adequately.**

Figure 2<sup>5</sup>



- **But the failure doesn’t magically disappear after middle school. It gets worse. By the time students reach Kentucky’s colleges and universities, nearly 40 percent discover they are ill-prepared for college-level work in at least one core academic area. And, while this trend is slowly improving, it may get worse as tougher standards for remedial course requirements are being implemented in Kentucky’s colleges and universities with the Class of 2010.**

Figure 3<sup>6</sup>



*It's not that the KERA era hasn't brought some improvement. It has.*

- KERA's anti-nepotism provisions broke up virtual family fiefdoms controlling some school districts – especially those in the rural and eastern parts of the commonwealth. Since school districts are primary employers with the largest budgets in many areas, the anti-nepotism provision ensured that powerful school bureaucrats were not hiring or supervising family members.
- Kentucky also became an early, and continuous, participant in the NAEP, even when such participation was completely voluntary. That participation provided valuable insight into the inflation that would occur as Kentucky launched, and then discarded, not one, but two Progressive Reform assessment programs.

### **Bottom line:**

**Mostly, KERA's promises remain unfulfilled. Even today, too many students lack adequate math and reading skills, too many don't complete high school and far too many enter college without the skills needed for freshman level work. The question is: Why?**

**It's crucial that we know...especially since a major overhaul of the commonwealth's public schools now is underway.**

## The education overhaul begins

- Passed in 2009, **Senate Bill 1's provisions** are scheduled to be implemented during the 2011-12 school year. This bill is intended to overhaul some of KERA's troublesome areas, primarily the portion involving low standards and costly, ineffective testing that offers little information needed to determine individual students' academic performance. It's meant to ensure that Kentucky's neediest – particularly minorities and special-needs students – don't get left behind.
- Considering Senate Bill 1 passed with strong bipartisan support, it's clear: Lawmakers want real change to occur. However, like all new laws, the proof will be in its implementation.
  - Will Senate Bill 1 become "KERA II," as some reformers fear, or will it live up to supportive lawmakers' hopes that the new policy will ensure schools adequately prepare young Kentuckians with the academic strength they will need to adequately compete in the highly competitive future global marketplace?
  - The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) – the same bureaucracy that oversaw the commonwealth's public education system throughout KERA – will also now be responsible for implementation of Senate Bill 1.
  - Will these bureaucrats put their biases to the side and honor the will of the people, as expressed by their representatives? Or will the education complex sabotage the process and condemn Kentucky to more decades of slow and halting performance? Perhaps shining a bright light on KERA's history will help contain KERA's damaging fallout and reverse the curse that seems to reside upon Kentucky's failing schools.

## Lessons Learned

***“Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”***

Prime Minister Winston Churchill

**LESSON LEARNED:** *Spend more money, get fewer results.*

***“You would risk a hernia if you tried to carry all the studies which show that more money has virtually no effect on the quality of American education.”*** –Thomas Sowell

- **KERA resulted in the biggest tax-and-spending increase in Kentucky’s history.**

The state sales tax rate rose from 5 percent to 6 percent. The corporate income-tax rate increased by a full percentage point. The state income-tax deduction for federal taxes was eliminated. All told: Kentuckians got slammed with a \$1.3 billion tax increase – \$950 million of which was pumped into the public education system.

Education spending rose a staggering 32 percent during the first two years of KERA alone. Kentucky radically reduced its average per-pupil spending gaps with the rest of the nation: from \$3,500 in 1989 to \$1,100 in 2006. <sup>7</sup>

- **Funding gaps closed overnight.**

Funding deficiencies experienced by poor school districts – primarily in the rural and Appalachian regions – were at the heart of the lawsuit that led to KERA. Sixty-six superintendents from districts with low property tax bases filed suit against the state’s education system ... and won.

But like a powerful new drug, the dramatic overcorrection in the funding system that resulted also demonstrated some harmful side effects:

- **Funding centralized**

***“I knew Kentucky’s education system was pretty centralized. I was just surprised to find that so much money flows from the state,”*** said University of Kentucky economist Kenneth R. Troske.

In 2008, Troske authored a Bluegrass Institute/Friedman Foundation report that compared Kentucky’s educational spending with other states. He found that Local revenues account for only 31 percent of Kentucky school districts’ funding, compared to the national average of 43 percent. <sup>8</sup>

KERA created a dysfunctional, top-down funding system that attempted to hold local school districts accountable yet put Frankfort in charge of the purse strings.

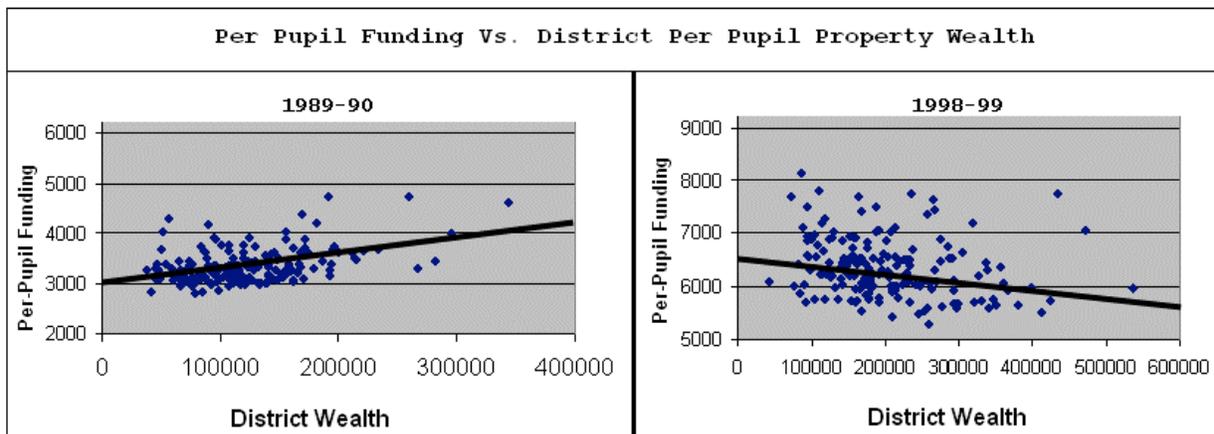
- **Wealth redistribution didn’t improve weak schools.**

KERA was a financial windfall for poorer, rural districts. Per-pupil spending gaps between districts in the poverty stricken Appalachian region of eastern Kentucky and the state’s metro areas narrowed from \$600 in 1987 to only \$10 in 2006.<sup>9</sup>

Progressives nationwide equated this achievement with the hanging of the stars. Yet because their bias is centered squarely on a “more money is the magic answer to every education problem” basis, they ignored the new problems this new funding formula created:

- While the per-pupil funding gap was closed, the gap in revenue sources widened. Urban and suburban areas were now forced to get a much-greater portion of their funding from local revenues than poorer districts.
- Local revenues now account for merely 17 percent of funding for eastern Kentucky school districts and only 20 percent for rural districts overall. The lion’s share of their funding – around 66 percent – comes from Frankfort with the remainder from Washington.<sup>10</sup>
- So students in high property-wealth districts like Northern Kentucky’s Boone County now are more likely to go to classes in portable buildings while those in lower property-wealth districts “down state” go to school in Taj Mahals.
- When KERA began, lower property-wealth districts also had schools with lower total per-pupil funding. So while some modification was needed, KERA didn’t just attempt to correct the problem. It badly overcorrected for it.

**Figure 4<sup>11</sup>**

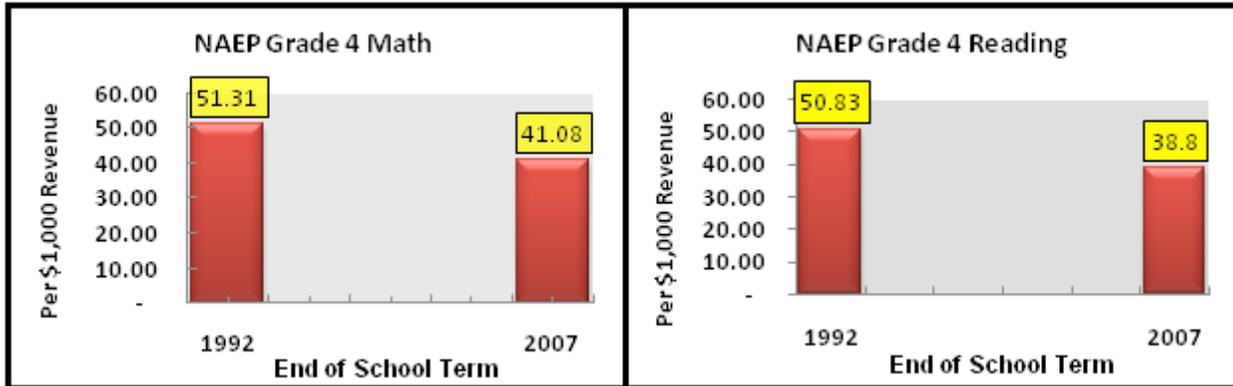


*This funding overcorrection failed to fulfill the promise of dramatically improved academic success for Kentucky’s children while actually delivering less – a lot less – bang for taxpayers’ bucks.*

- **More bucks, even less bang.**
  - While test scores have risen slightly under KERA, costs have skyrocketed. Each point gained on the credible national tests now costs Kentucky more than ever.

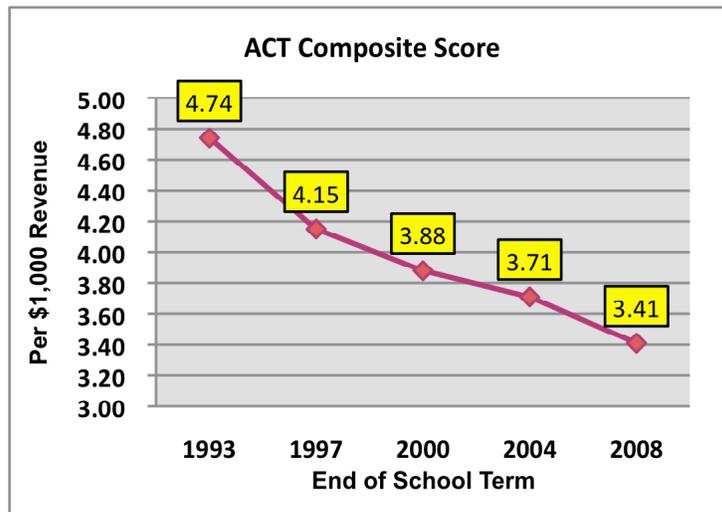
- It's happening on the NAEP, "The Nation's Report Card," where there was a **20 percent and 24 percent drop in the points per dollars** in fourth-grade math and reading scores, respectively, between 1992 and 2007.

Figure 5<sup>12</sup>



- It also happened on the ACT college entrance test. Check out the **28-percent drop** in the points per dollar in Kentucky's ACT Composite Score between 1993 and 2008:

Figure 6<sup>13</sup>



- The Bluegrass Institute's "Bang for the Buck" report uncovered the secret KERA fanatics don't want you to know: Kentucky school districts where considerably **more money** is spent often produce **worse academic results**.<sup>14</sup>
  - Measuring per-pupil spending against the CATS scores in every Kentucky school, a Bluegrass Institute metric called the Score-Spending Index (SSI) shows:

- Many schools achieve solid academic results with much-less funding than others. For example, Carlisle Elementary spent nearly \$3,080 per pupil in 2004 – well below the state average of \$5,900 – with a poverty rate of nearly 60 percent, yet produced an above-average CATS score and a remarkably high SSI. This school has cracked the code on how to educate efficiently.
- By contrast, Jefferson County’s Shawnee High School spent \$11,900 per student during the 2003-04 school year – more than twice the \$5,300 state average – yet failed with a miserly 46.8 on the CATS Index . . . way below the 70.9 state average and the eventual state goal of a score of 100. This school’s SSI is incredibly low, showing it is very inefficient at educating children.
- Eighteen of the 30 worst-performing schools (10 at every school level – elementary, middle and high schools) – are in the Jefferson County Public Schools District, the state’s largest school district with the biggest budget. A JCPS school also was the worst-performing at each school level. According to the SSI, not a single school from either of Kentucky’s largest districts in Jefferson or Fayette counties was among the best-performing elementary, middle or high schools.
  - To guard against exaggerating how bad the news really is, these SSI scores were based on the exceedingly optimistic CATS test scores. Considering how low CATS set its passing bar (well below the bar for proficiency set in the NAEP, for example), it’s a safe bet that Kentucky taxpayers are getting even less bang for the buck than the SSI index shows.
  - Note: The education bureaucracy takes the opposite approach, spinning any remotely critical data until either it looks better or taxpayers, parents, students and legislators are too dizzy to get it in focus.
- Not only did spending more money result in less academic bang for the buck, it also reinforced a continuing cycle of failure. Spending more money equated to rewarding failure – over and over and over.
  - While billions in additional tax dollars was raised and spent, Kentucky’s education system leaders failed to implement metrics with aggressive improvement goals to determine real progress. Instead, they were content to spin the data and cover up the failure.
  - One reason our education leaders can get by with this is: there are few serious consequences for them if kids fail. My guess: If these bureaucrats’ jobs were at risk and there was no more money to spend, educators would have found ways by now to improve learning in their schools – or they would have been changing careers.

**Bottom line:**  
**Section 183 of Kentucky’s Constitution says: “The General Assembly shall, by appropriate legislation, provide for an efficient system of common schools throughout the State.”**  
**Considering the financial inefficiency and academic ineffectiveness of KERA, how can any stakeholder reach any other conclusion other than: it was a total economic bust?**

# LESSON LEARNED: *Violate the chain of command, lose all control.*

Efficient, well-run organizations have clearly defined organizational structures where the chain of command and accountability are clear. When the chain of command becomes disrupted, accountability becomes impossible to enforce. KERA thoroughly destroyed the chain of command and the real accountability that goes with it, through radical and undemocratic governance changes that had never proven to work in a statewide program. KERA, among other things, completely locks local voters out of any say about how their local schools operate.

- ***Are the inmates in charge of the asylum?***

- One of KERA's most damaging policies was the establishment of **School-Based Decision-Making Councils (SBDM)**, a radical change in the way schools are run.
- SBDM amounted to a massive power shift that took every key decision concerning curriculum, distribution of funds, building operations – even principal selections – away from locally elected school boards and superintendents who are considered the district-management experts. This authority instead was placed in the hands of three teachers, the principal and two parents in each school. Thus, a largely inexperienced, part-time, largely unaccountable, management group with extremely limited resources for research was suddenly faced with making decisions that they often were totally unequipped to handle.
- With SBDM, the employees are in charge of hiring their bosses because the three teachers form a voting majority on the SBDM! Amazingly, while superintendents maintain symbolic authority over a district and can fire a poorly performing principal, KERA actually allows the SBDM to immediately rehire the same person. ***The courts have upheld this insane practice because it's law ... KERA law!***
- Instead of a clear chain of command and accountability, control of Kentucky's public schools is now in chaos.
  - Superintendents correctly claim they lack the authority to demand meaningful changes in schools. On most important decisions, the SBDM trumps the superintendent every time.
  - Local boards of education also are rendered largely impotent, except as tax-collecting agents, as their chosen education expert – the superintendent – can't enforce policy effectively.
  - Even within the school, the chain of accountability and authority are undermined. Under this scheme, principal selection can, and has, turned into a popularity contest with teachers. This acts to dilute the principal's authority as leader in the school building. It enables unproductive teachers to continue hiring bosses who won't push them to improve.

- SBDM offer yet another example of a well-intentioned, but disastrous, education policy.
  - Intended: More “local” control of schools.
  - Reality: A concrete-like barrier was erected around failing schools, ensuring no one is held accountable while the SBDM management scheme prevents appropriate pressure needed to force improvement off the premises altogether.
  - Education bureaucrats and politicians supported KERA even though they – and the law itself – were *“unclear about the role of the principal, the superintendent, and the school board in decision making.”*<sup>15</sup>
- *“But legislators said that questions about the site-based management – as well as many other aspects of the bill – can only be answered once districts actually begin to implement its various provisions.”*<sup>16</sup>

Teachers’ unions ardently support this failing model because it allows:

- Failing teachers to hide in failing schools while both escape all accountability. Not one teacher in Kentucky has ever had a teaching certificate revoked due to poor classroom performance.
- Union bosses to dig in against any system change. SBDM provide teacher-controlled layers of armor-clad protection that keep poorly performing – but dues-paying – teachers on union rolls.
- The real losers in all this are the children. Kentucky’s public school students fail when neither state law nor school leadership represents their best interests and stymies all attempts to remove incompetent teachers from the system.
- ***Kentucky has been too slow to address the SBDM situation***
  - Even under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which exposed the serious failure of Kentucky’s testing system to identify and penalize achievement gaps, only a handful of schools have lost their SBDM authority. However, it’s significant that when schools grossly fail, one of the first federally-demanded actions is to remove SBDM authority – potent evidence that in the minds of objective education leaders, SBDM are a major cause of Kentucky’s education problems.

**KERAZy:**  
 As of 2008, Kentucky had 34 NCLB “Tier 5” schools. All had failed to make progress for at least six years. Yet in that same year, only four schools lost their SBDM authority.

In order to qualify for federal School Improvement Grant money in 2010, the feds have forced Kentucky to start getting more aggressive in failing schools. The 10 schools listed in Table 1 were identified as the state’s first group of “Persistently Low-Achieving Schools” under this new, federally required program.

**Table 1** <sup>17</sup>

<b>Capacity to Manage School Recovery</b>		
<b>School</b>	<b>Principal</b>	<b>SBDM</b>
Robert Frost Middle School Jefferson County	NO	NO
Western Middle School, Jefferson County	NO	Lost SBDM Authority, but only in 2008
Fern Creek Traditional High School, Jefferson County	NO	NO
Shawnee High School, Jefferson County	YES	NO
Western High School, Jefferson County	YES	NO
Valley High School, Jefferson County	NO	NO
Leslie County High School	YES	YES
Caverna High School, Caverna Independent	YES	YES
Metcalfe County High School	NO	NO
Lawrence County High School	NO	NO

- Six of these 10 schools' principals were judged inadequate to improve their schools. That means only 40 percent of SBDM leadership choices offered the potential for real improvement. Even KERA's fuzzy math system would consider 40 percent a dismal failure.
- NCLB, not KERA, forced Kentucky to face the fact that only two of the SBDM were considered strong enough to remain in charge of the schools.
- For education bureaucrats and teachers' unions, the KERA-based SBDM system offered a different kind of triumph: More day-to-day control of our children's education. For students in failing schools, the scheme was a disaster.

**Bottom line:**

**How many private organizations can you name that turned total management control over to three non-management personnel and two "customers?" Kentucky must eliminate the KERA-induced SBDM process if schools are to improve and leaders are to be held accountable. Failing to do so will neglect history and induce entire generations of Kentuckians to abject educational failure.**

LESSON LEARNED: *Build a foundation on faulty  
research,  
live in a defective house.*

- **From the outset, KERA was dominated by faulty theory, not scientifically researched best practices.**
  - While the KERA legislation was being debated, skeptics' questions often were quashed with the statement: "The research shows." History has exposed those claims as fantasies, mostly because the quality of "research" in the field of education is usually too poor to "show" anything.
  - Still today, educators continue to offer "research shows" claims when faced with serious, common-sense concerns about public schools and education systems.

**Arthur Levine, researcher par excellence and Columbia Teacher's College past president, says most of what passes for "research" in education fails the credibility test.**

- According to Levine, scientifically credible research on education issues is extremely rare:

***"There is widespread disagreement among policymakers, researchers and practitioners about what constitutes good research and how to prepare education researchers."* – Arthur Levine<sup>18</sup>**

Levine offers this startling revelation about his interviews with those in the education sector responsible for training the research community: ***"It quickly became apparent that in today's highly charged environment, those interviewed for this study had less interest in 'truth telling' than in defending their positions."***<sup>19</sup>

If those training the researchers are not interested in arriving at truth, what does that say about what passes for "education research," and upon which legislators, school boards, parents and taxpayers rely?

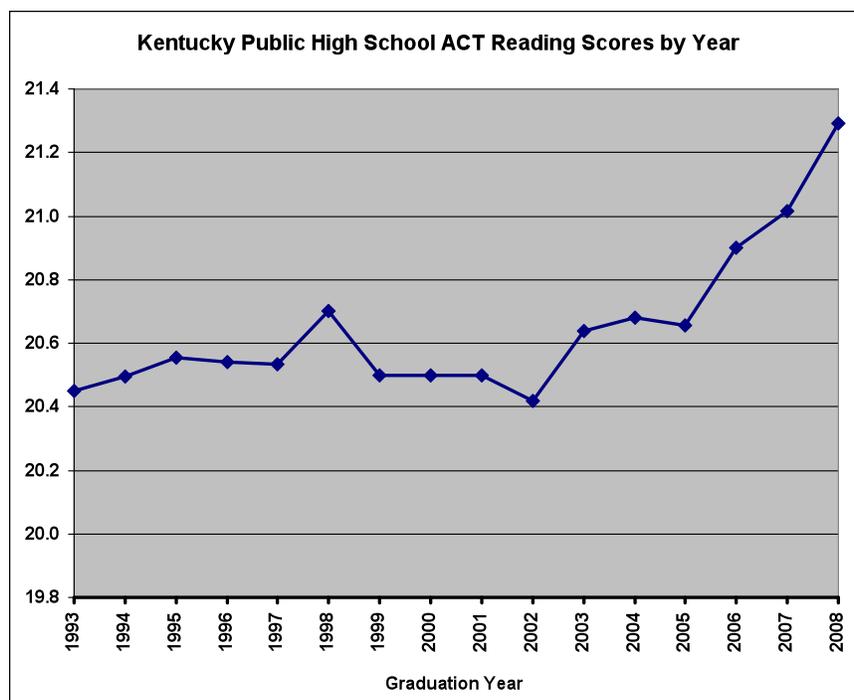
### **Flawed research = 'fad ideas'**

*Educational elitists' fantasy island has been surrounded by failed experiments.* One wonders if the same approach would have been taken if Progressive Educators had been told: **"Your job is at risk – here's what you have to accomplish. How do you want to do it?"** True accountability has a way of separating reality from fantasy.

## Whole language reading

- Reading is the most important academic skill a child can learn in school. But early KERA theories about how to teach reading resulted in Progressive educators' theories replacing tried-and-true best practices that have worked for centuries with a radically different approach.
- Phonics vs. Whole Language
  - Whole language theorists were utterly hostile to the idea that practice makes perfect. Instead, they theorized that children could learn to read by "immersion," much like babies learn to speak by being surrounded by older speakers. For them, the "drill and skill" of phonics-based reading instruction was "drill and kill."
  - But English is a phonetic language. Contrary to what the academic dreamers pushed for, successfully training children to read involves: practice, teaching text-decoding skills and – yes – rote memory.
  - No wonder Kentucky's reading scores remained low during these reckless experiments and didn't start to make any notable improvement until 2006:

Figure 7<sup>20</sup>



- **The reading wars: Public education's equivalent of the Crusades**
  - Why did "whole language" policies cause such pandemonium across the nation in the 1990s?

- Could the approach taken by University of Arizona professor Ken Goodman, who developed the “whole language” scheme, have something to do with the turbulence? It’s possible when you consider Goodman’s recommended approach was teaching kids to “guess an upcoming word rather than using the word’s spelling.”<sup>21</sup>
- “Phonics,” Goodman once wrote, “is a flat-earth view of the world, since it rejects modern science about reading and writing and how they develop.”<sup>22</sup>
- But, it was Goodman’s approach that lacked the science. As the thermometer of criticism related to his theories and the failure of America’s kids rose, Goodman himself became less able to defend his theory on the basis of sound research, and in stubborn defiance, employed a favorite tactic of Progressive Educators when their fantasy island is invaded by factual reality: finger-pointing.
  - Goodman never could cite “research from other fields to confirm his findings.” Instead, his “main strategy in response to his critics is to say they are unwitting pawns of the Christian right.”<sup>23</sup>
  - Regardless of Goodman’s assertions, Time concluded:

***“After reviewing the arguments mustered by the phonics and whole-language proponents, can we make a judgment as to who is right? Yes. The value of explicit, systematic phonics instruction has been well established. Hundreds of studies from a variety of fields support this conclusion. Indeed, the evidence is so strong that if the subject under discussion were, say, the treatment of the mumps, there would be no discussion.”<sup>24</sup>***

- It’s worth noting that KERA came along in 1990, just in time for the math and reading wars. The fact that KERA implemented such whole language-friendly policies clearly demonstrates that Goodman’s brethren, the Progressives, were controlling Kentucky’s education system.
- Progressives took the “guessing” approach toward teaching kids to read and do mathematics. Traditionalists took the “proven” approach. Guessing vs. Knowing: A microcosm of the entire battle over education research in Kentucky and America.

**KERAZy:**  
**Kentucky’s fourth-grade reading score on the NAEP dropped between 1992 and 1994. Scores only started to improve after teachers were allowed to use phonics. Thousands of Kentucky students were improperly taught how to read ... all because of faulty research. Many now reside in Kentucky’s burgeoning penal system.**

## 'Conjunction Junction, what's your function?'

- One of KERA's great aberrations is that it purported to increase emphasis on writing while simultaneously de-emphasizing spelling, grammar and nearly ignoring punctuation altogether.
- **Writing portfolios dominated KERA.** They took inordinate amounts of time. Portfolios can be a good instructional tool when used properly. But the way they were implemented under KERA actually negatively impacted Kentucky students' writing performance.
- For example, the bureaucracy's great concern that cheating (by teachers) would occur led to the creation of rules that actually impaired writing instruction.
  - **Students were left to guess about punctuation.** Teachers were allowed only to circle a questionable punctuation mark and make an obscure entry in the margin indicating something was wrong. But they could not tell students specifically what that "something" was. *They were strictly forbidden from giving detailed instruction on punctuation errors and were absolutely forbidden from offering alternative examples about how to fix them.*
  - **Is it any wonder that with such bizarre policies, writing scores remained near the bottom?**

**The latest NAEP scores** indicate Kentucky does no better in writing than California. That is particularly disturbing because nearly half of all students taking the NAEP in the Golden State are Hispanic and 21 percent of California's entire tested sample still are learning English – compared to 1 percent in Kentucky. Yet...overall writing proficiency rates are *the same* in both states.

When examined by race, NAEP writing proficiency indicate that Kentucky's dominant racial group – white student who comprised 86 percent of the eighth grade students in the Bluegrass State – are being left way behind by whites in California.

Table 2<sup>25</sup>

### Kentucky vs. California: What can we learn?

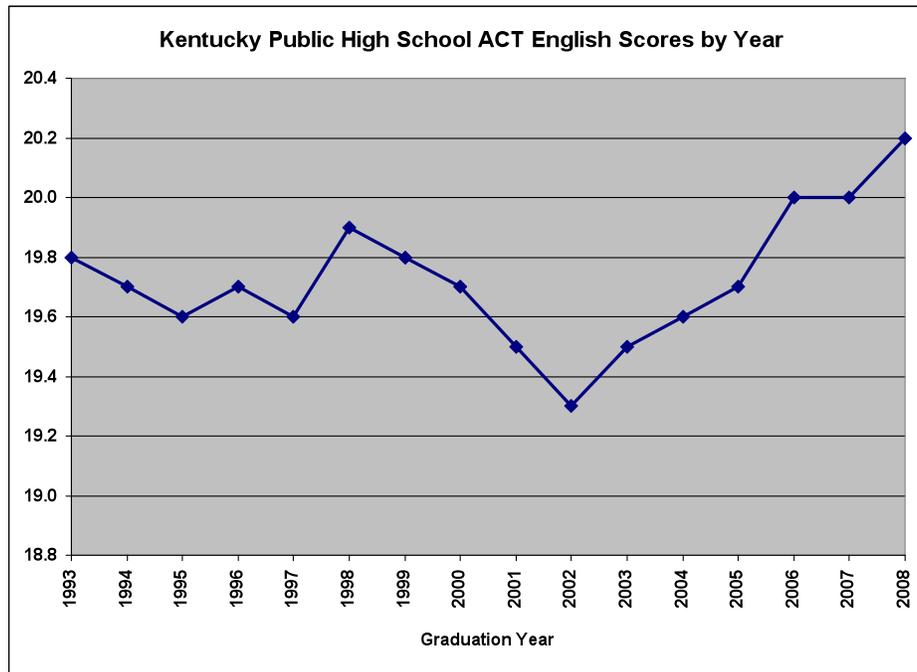
(Percent of students demonstrating writing proficiency on the 2007 NAEP writing test)

Jurisdiction	White		Black		Hispanic		Asian/Pacific Island		American Indian		Unclassified	
	Percent Scoring At/Above Proficient	Percentage of Test Sample	Percent Scoring At/Above Proficient	Percentage of Test Sample	Percent Scoring At/Above Proficient	Percentage of Test Sample	Percent Scoring At/Above Proficient	Percentage of Test Sample	Percent Scoring At/Above Proficient	Percentage of Test Sample	Percent Scoring At/Above Proficient	Percentage of Test Sample
California	38	31	13	7	13	48	44	12	17	1	‡	1
Kentucky	27	86	14	10	‡	2	‡	1	‡	0	‡	1

‡ Reporting standards not met.

*Is it any wonder that English scores also declined during the first decade of KERA?*

Figure 8<sup>26</sup>



## Fuzzy Math

- **Dumbed-down curriculum.** While implementing KERA, the KDE relied heavily on a 1989 model math curriculum developed by the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), an organization dominated by Progressives. Math fundamentals, including teaching multiplication tables and fractions, were shunned in favor of vague concepts of “math understanding.”
  - **The charge:** After an entire decade of this nonsense, college mathematics professors at the nation’s universities led a charge to reform the curriculum. Thank goodness, they won.
  - **The change:** The NCTM amended its model in 2006, indicating clearly that instruction in basics is a fundamental requirement of any respectable math curriculum. In the meantime, *hundreds of thousands of Kentucky students were taught with this failed approach while passing through the KERA system. No one was ever held accountable even though the costs to students and their parents – in areas such as remedial math courses in college – have been extensive.*
- **Math portfolios.** Did education officials in Kentucky and across the country really believe that students could learn math by *writing* about it? Yep. No longer did the correct answer count. The only outcome that seemed to matter: Progressive educators got to see their NCTM-favored views pushed on to the kids of Kentucky.

- Elites snubbed “drill and skill,” calling it “drill and kill.” But it turned out parents, the university math community and just about anyone with an ounce of common sense considered these “holistic” approaches to math and reading nothing short of “horrible.”
- Even with the aggressive opposition of parents, the university community and many legislators, it took four long years for Kentucky to rid itself of the KERA-induced math portfolios. And again, while this was happening, **hundreds of thousands of Kentucky students were taught this failed approach while passing through the KERA system. And again, no one was ever held accountable.**

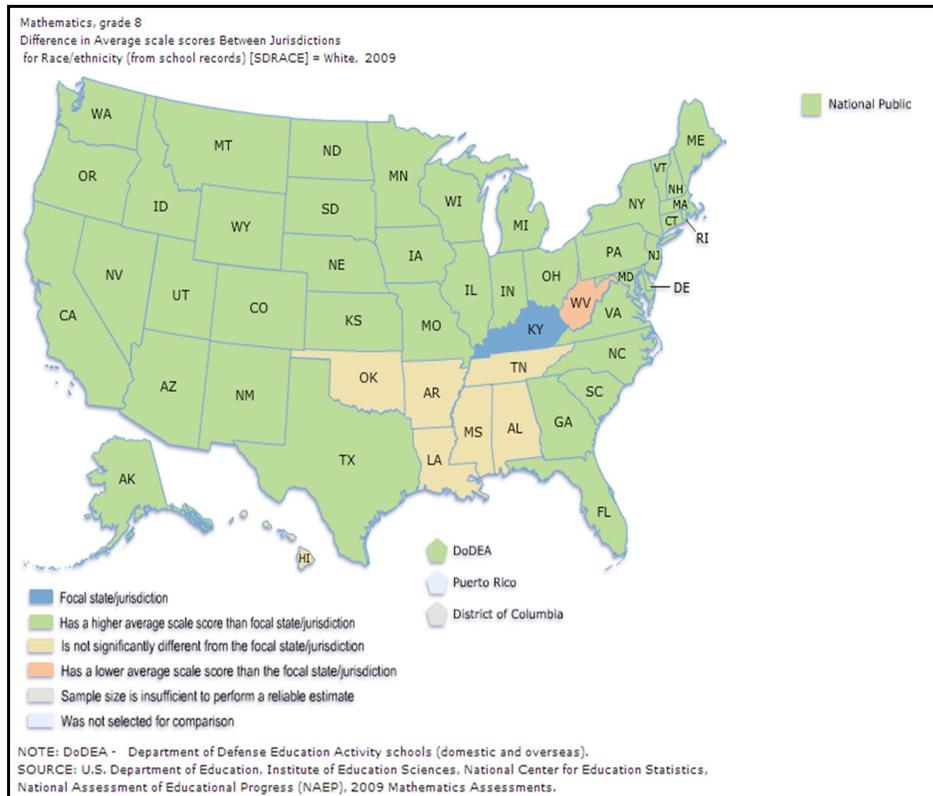
**KERAZy:**

**In fact, bumping into an educator who's ever been held accountable for failing our kids is rarer than finding hen's teeth. Apparently, not a single Kentucky public school teacher has ever had his or her teaching certification revoked because of a failing performance. Not one.**

- **What all this fuzzy math adds up to:**

- White students in 47 states had statistically significantly higher math scores than Kentucky's whites received in the most recent NAEP eighth grade math assessment. Only West Virginia did worse.

**Figure 9<sup>27</sup>**  
**White Student Grade 8 NAEP Math Results in 2009**  
**States that Outscored, Tied and Performed More Poorly Than Kentucky**  
**(States in Green Outscored Kentucky)**



- **Kids hate spinach, elementary teachers avoid math.**

- Odds are stacked against math improvement. What chance does Kentucky have of improving its math performance considering its elementary school teachers were themselves poor math students throughout school and college?
- Kentucky teachers can receive their Bachelor's degree and get a job in one of Kentucky's elementary schools even though they have taken only a single math course in college. At Kentucky's colleges and universities, those courses are called "Elementary Mathematics" and are taught **below the level of a college algebra class.**
- *Teachers' unions undoubtedly are pleased with such an arrangement. Who cares if the teacher in the classroom can teach math? Who cares if kids get basic math skills needed to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace? After all, this teacher is good for something – annual dues. Of course, those monies collected will be used by union bosses to promote political candidates and policies that ensure these failing teachers will never be held accountable or shown the door.*
- There should be no hesitation about accepting proven programs like Singapore Math for every Kentucky school. Why hasn't it already been implemented?

## **KERAZy:**

**The price paid for nearly a decade of fuzzy math: NAEP shows hundreds of thousands of Kentucky children were not taught basic math skills since KERA's enactment. Critics of fuzzy math were constantly told, "the research says...." But the results show: Fuzzy math doesn't work.**

## **Bottom line:**

**Kentucky's new education law must rely on credible research and proven practices – as the 2000 Reading Panel appointed by Congress revealed – not a hope and a prayer, like those who rushed KERA into existence and have lived in denial ever since.**

## LESSON LEARNED: *Testing matters*

Under KERA, Progressives attacked tried-and-true methods of objective testing strategies in favor of group tasks, including what were known as “performance events,” where “emphasis is placed on self-reflection, understanding and growth rather than responses based only on recall of isolated facts.”<sup>28</sup>

### **This approach led to some utter failures:**

- **Opening up about open-response questions: Your bias is showing.**
  - **Misguided intention:** Believing multiple-choice questions encourage overly narrow curriculum and “teach-to-the-test” mentalities, the KDE saw to it that KIRIS – KERA’s first testing system – relied heavily on open-response questions.
    - Open-response questions require students to generate their own responses through various means: writing one or two paragraph responses or by creating “visual” answers such as charts, tables or graphs.
    - These questions are less objective, much harder to grade and take a great deal longer for students to answer. Because the questions are very time-inefficient, heavy use of open-response questions results in individual students being incompletely tested across the full range of the curriculum. Thus, scores for these students lack validity and reliability.
  - **An inappropriate fix:** Progressives, in response to the time and objectivity challenges presented by open-response questions, experienced an Ah-ha! Moment: “We’ll ‘matrix’ the tests!” they joyfully exclaimed.
    - With full apologies to the movies series of the same name, KERA’s “matrix” was a reality disaster, not a successful sequel. Each student was tested only on a portion – often a very small one – of the overall curriculum. The matrix theory held that when lots of these incomplete samplings of individual students’ performances were averaged together, an accurate evaluation of the overall school performance could be obtained.
    - However, matrixing had many unsatisfactory consequences.
      - The results could not provide high-confidence answers to what parents really wanted to know: “How are our children doing in school?”
      - The results really could not be fairly used to evaluate teachers, either, because at the classroom level there were too few student responses to be averaged together in the matrix.
      - Basically, Kentucky was getting back some of the least amounts of information from one of the nation’s most expensive testing programs.

- Of course, it might have helped if the test graders had known the correct answers.
  - Concerns about the test questions themselves arose soon after KIRIS, KERA’s first testing apparatus, was put in place and sample problems were released to the public.
  - Problems were found with many open-response questions (examples of which are found in the Bluegrass Institute’s full report entitled “KERA: What have we learned?”). Here’s a sample from the math test given to fourth-graders on the 1992 KIRIS:

Figure 10<sup>29</sup>

**Figure 5a shows the instructions given to ‘Katy’:**

Figure 5a

You and your friend, Katy, are in charge of designing a border to go across the top of the chalkboard. You each agree to make a design that would work well on the chalkboard. You make strips of graph paper like the one in your answer folder to use to draw the designs. On Saturday, Katy calls you and tells you how she constructed her design so you can draw her design.

- a. First, read Katy’s instructions below.
- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Put your pencil at START and, drawing line segments as you go, go to the right 3 units. | 5. Go left 1 unit.  |
| 2. Go down 2 units.  | 6. Go down 2 units.   |
| 3. Go left 1 unit.   | 7. Go right 4 units.  |
| 4. Go up 1 unit.   | 8. Go up 3 units.   |
|  | 9. Now you have drawn the basic design. Repeat the design 2 more times. |

Now, draw Katy’s design on the GRID for open-response question 3 in your answer folder.

Figure 5b

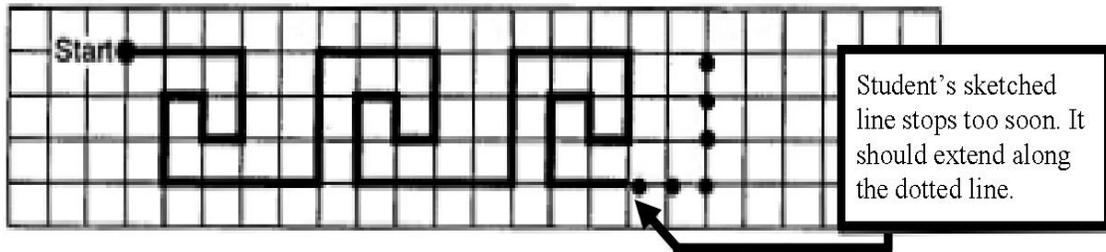


Figure 5b shows an answer judged “Distinguished” by the KDE was *incorrect* as the student failed to draw all of the required lines.

- Matrix supporters claim “the research says” multiple-choice test questions are not useful for determining student knowledge and higher order thinking skills. Such allegations ignore:
  - A growing body of knowledge finds multiple-choice tests are called “objective tests” for a definite reason: these tests offer vast compensating values.
  - While multiple-choice tests certainly had limitations at KERA’s creation in 1990 and continue to have some today, they now do a pretty good job of assessing higher order thinking skills

while maintaining advantages of time-efficiency resulting in more rapid turnaround of results, greater economy to create and score, and validity and reliability that open-response questions cannot begin to approach.

- In sharp contrast, open-response questions continue to have many major shortcomings, including finding graders with the considerable subject knowledge and skill required to do this laborious work at reasonable cost.
- Testing dominated by open-response questioning is expensive. One education economist estimated per-pupil opportunity cost for the KIRIS tests alone was \$1,792! (CRESST)<sup>30</sup>

## **KERAZy:**

**Progressive educators currently are heavily involved in the national effort to create the Common Core Standards Assessments from which states, including Kentucky, will get future test questions. Those Progressives informed a recent Brookings Institution conference that they plan to use lots of open-response and performance items in their new assessment. The Common Core Standards Assessment development teams claim testing time consumed by open-response questions will lessen considerably because computers will now do the grading. But it's absurd to believe a computer can read Katy's mind (see the earlier test question) to determine what Katy's friend really intended for her to do, as well as whether she actually did it. Besides, testing experts such as Gregory Cizek, who also spoke at the same Brookings event, have stated such technology remains undeveloped and unproved for such a widespread application.<sup>31</sup>**

**\*\*NOTE:** Missouri recently erased complicated writing and problem-solving portions from the state's annual standardized test – to save money! By suspending just those two portions until the 2012-13 school year, the Show-Me State will save \$1.3 million of the \$8 million it spends annually on the test. Kentucky spent more than \$10 million a year on the CATS, KERA's second test, which was – to the joy of most Kentucky parents – eliminated in 2009. But will Kentucky's educators even give a second thought to keeping costs down and giving taxpayers a break? If past history is any indication, efficiency will be the furthest thing from their minds as they adopt new tests to replace the CATS program, even though Kentucky's constitution requires an "efficient" education system.

# LESSON LEARNED: *Performance Events' equal unsustainable futility.*

***"Performance events" = small group problem-solving on steroids ...***

- **Misguided intention:** Determine whether fourth-grade students can work in groups to solve problems.
  - A typical fourth-grade performance event involved asking students to determine the number of near-life-size lady bug cartoons on a piece of paper. Educators thought the students would do something like: dividing the paper into fourths, counting the number of lady bugs in one of the sections and then multiplying that number by four to get the total estimated number of ladybugs on the paper. After the students completed their "field work," each one wrote a separate report to be graded at a central site.
  - **Progressive educators considered performance events the "great hope" of KERA.**
    - Progressive educators thought they had found a way around the tried and true methods of testing – objective, multiple-choice test questions – that were especially effective at exposing the failure of Kentucky's public education system to prepare especially its minority and at-risk students for the world ahead.
- Seem like a "creepy" method of teaching to you? You're not the only one.
  - **Unintended consequence:** It was an exercise in unsustainable futility based on ***"a lack of adequate research ... only recognized after the fact."***<sup>31</sup>
  - In our lady bug example, fourth-grade students should have been able to count up all the pictures in a matter of minutes without exhibiting any higher order analysis skills beyond deciding the adults who created the problem were pretty dumb to expect them to do anything more involved. That obvious approach apparently never occurred to the Progressives who created this rather weak question.
  - Because they are easy to remember and to avoid teaching to the test, performance events must be changed frequently.
    - Creating new performance events of comparable difficulty is extraordinarily difficult and expensive.
    - In fact, the process may not be possible over the long term. It certainly proved unsupportable in Kentucky.
- What finally happened:

- The legislature threw out performance events after all Kentucky middle schools got dramatically low scores in 1996 on an event that decent field testing *should* have shown was far too difficult.
- The “events” yielded no helpful information that improved students’ learning or assessment of skills.<sup>32</sup>
- “In the end, issues of creating, linking and equating different performance events from year to year (in order to prevent ‘teaching to the test’) proved unworkable.”<sup>33</sup>

# LESSON LEARNED: *Ungraded classrooms are no better than traditional ones.*

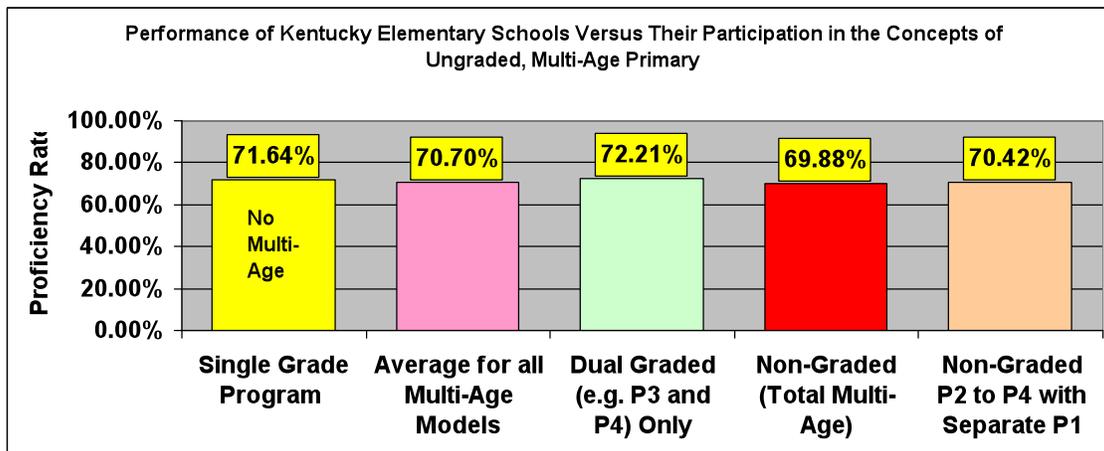
**Ungraded primaries** attempt to group students according to developmental levels rather than their ages.

- The belief is that this approach would keep students from developing feelings of inadequacy and would somehow or other turn them into star students.
- Unintended Consequences:
  - KERA’s “Ungraded Primary” policy has caused major tension between parents and school administrators and teachers. In one extreme example, the principal at a Lexington elementary school was forced out of her job in August 2007 after not allowing students to advance to the third grade because they were unprepared for CATS testing – *even though holding kids back when they were not ready to advance was what she was supposed to do under the ungraded primary concept.*
  - Ungraded primaries make it difficult for parents to know where their child stands and how he or she is progressing. The concept also interferes with setting accountability standards for teachers in the program.
  - Kentucky schools that still use ungraded primary are not producing memorable results. In fact, most do slightly worse than schools with traditional, graded structures.

Figure 11<sup>34</sup>

## Combined Math and Reading Proficiency Rate in Kentucky Elementary Schools versus the Degree of Implementation of Ungraded Primary Concepts

2007-08 School Term



- Why this matters: Progressive educators are still pushing the multi-age idea in other states. They clearly are ignoring the lessons from almost two decades of the ungraded primary approach in Kentucky.

## **KERAZy:**

The “ungraded primary” approach provides yet another example of how Progressives go to the mat for dubious experiments that don’t really improve students’ chances for educational success rather than working with tried-and-true concepts such as school choice, phonics and “drill to skill” mathematics. It makes one wonder if such an obsessive commitment to unproductive fads that never had the support of credible research or stakeholders is more about Progressives’ own self-esteem than about how the kids are doing.

## **Bottom line:**

As Kentucky prepares to implement a new education law, it must not rely on the same faulty research that gave us writing portfolios and open-response questions which made kids hate writing and led to dismal test scores in Writing and English.

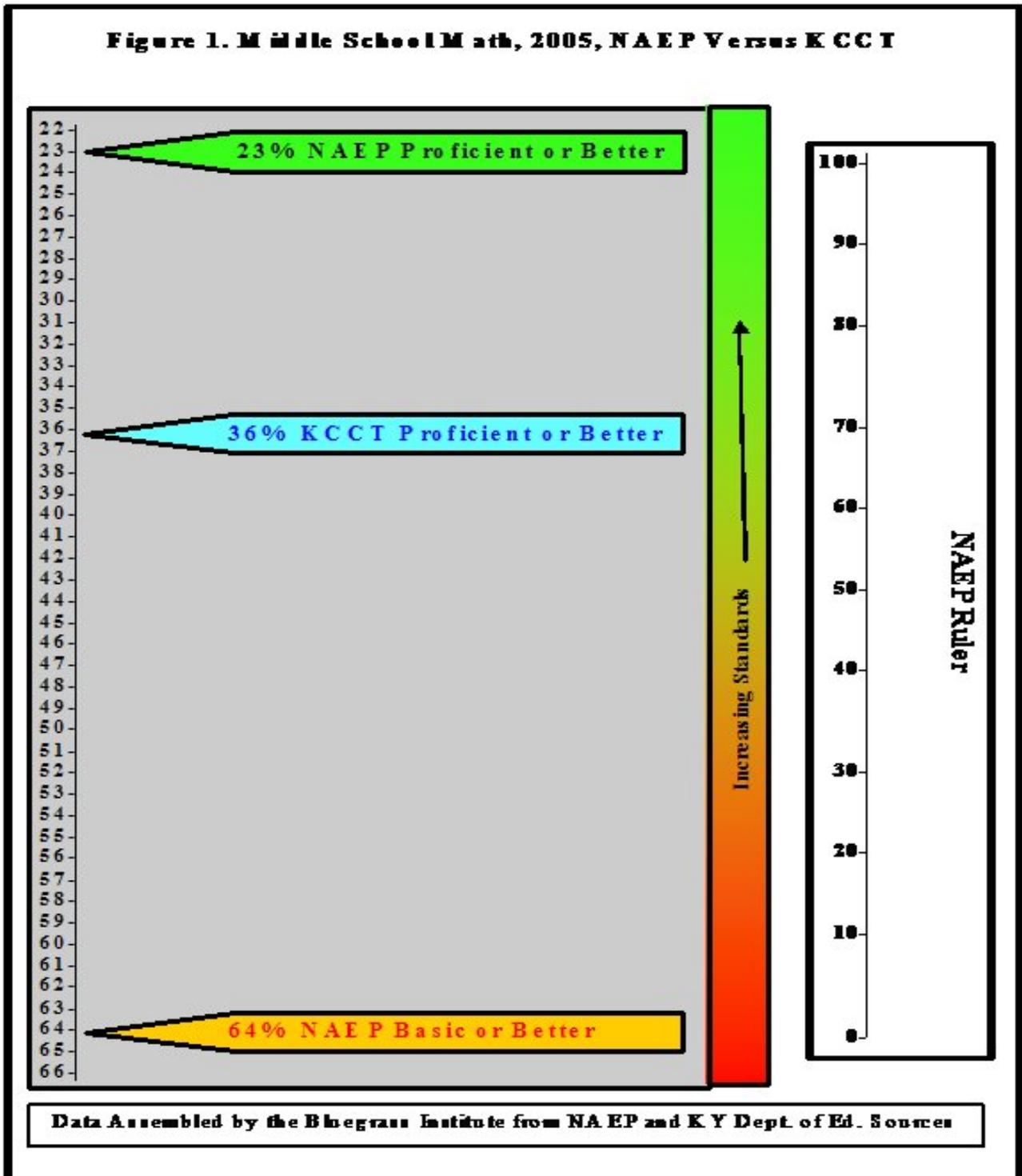
## LESSON LEARNED: *Raise the bar, drop the spin.*

***“Setting the bar as low as possible and aiming only for the lowest common denominator may inhibit failure but it also prevents success.”***

**Maureen Stout, “The Feel-Good Curriculum: The Dumbing Down of America’s Kids in the Name of Self-Esteem”**

- A Calvin and Hobbes cartoon once carried a series of episodes that cuts to the heart of Kentucky’s education problems. Calvin was explaining to Hobbes the secret to success: Simply lower the bar far enough, he explained, and voila! – You will have already reached all of your goals!
- When No Child Left Behind became law in 2001, it required all schools in the nation demonstrate 100 percent proficiency by 2014.
  - Some states seized the opportunity to honestly assess their current performance and begin a process of genuine reform.
  - Others, like Kentucky, took full advantage of an NCLB loophole allowing states to determine what kind of progress they needed to make each year in order to meet the 100 percent proficiency rate NCLB requires.
    - Kentucky education officials set the bar very low in the beginning of NCLB and prayed that a new presidential administration would lead an effort to repeal NCLB before the 2014 D-Day arrived. So far, their prayers have gone unanswered.
    - Standards have declined and test scores have become more inflated since CATS became the state’s testing system in 1999.
- The bar has *always* been too low. According to the Bluegrass Institute’s “State-to-NAEP Rigor Ratio,” Kentucky reached the CATS bar of “proficiency” after climbing only up 68 percent of the NAEP wall.

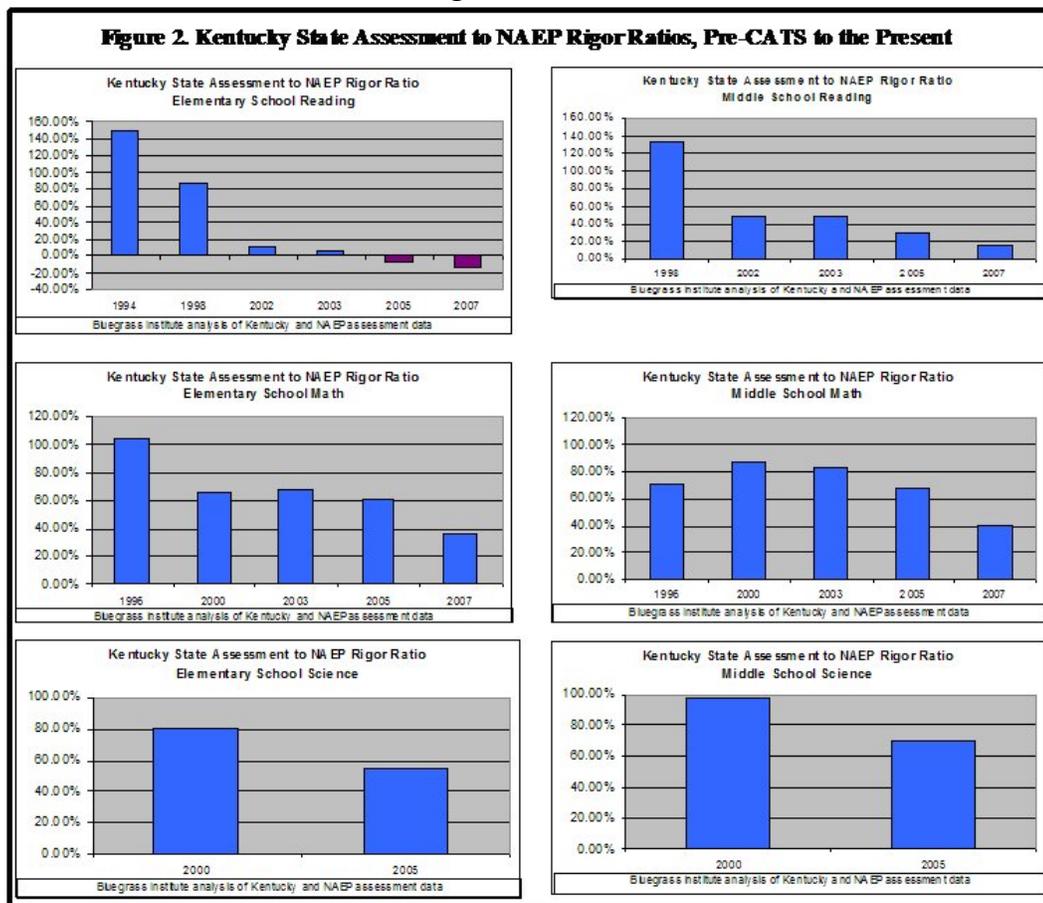
Figure 12<sup>36</sup>



LESSON LEARNED: ... *The credibility gap keeps growing...*

- **NAEP vs. CATS: Uncovering the cover-up:** In 2005, CATS reported that **36 percent** of Kentucky's eighth-graders were proficient in math. But the much more respectable NAEP (a.k.a. "The Nation's Report Card") indicated only a **23 percent** proficiency rate among the commonwealth's eighth-grade students.<sup>37</sup>
- The gaps kept growing while the spin got even faster. In 2007, the KDE claimed **73 percent** of Kentucky's elementary school students were proficient readers. But the NAEP reported only **33 percent** reached proficiency. **All the while, Kentucky parents were assured: All is well in Educationland.**

Figure 13<sup>38</sup>



**Bottom line: The NAEP really has little motive to indicate Kentucky's scores are lower than they actually are. On the other hand, Kentucky's education aristocracy has every reason to pad the numbers while hoping lawmakers, taxpayers and parents bury their heads deeper in the sand.**

**LESSON LEARNED:** *Teachers' unions don't represent  
kids.*

Teachers' unions don't represent the children. They only stand for the interests of adults in the system ... and some of those adults don't want changes.

***"When school children start paying union dues, that's when I'll start representing the interests of school children."<sup>39</sup>***

Albert Shanker, Past President  
American Federation of Teachers

- Throughout KERA's history, it has been very clear that some state leaders mostly take their marching orders from the state's teachers' unions – the commonwealth's largest campaign-contributing entities. Unfortunately, union agendas usually collide with the best interests of children and parents in many areas such as:
  - Creating real school-choice options for parents
  - Implementing merit-pay programs that would entice highly talented individuals to enter teaching and entice existing teachers to improve their skills and be willing to serve where most needed
  - Overly influencing election of local and state officials who impact education
  - Placing highly experienced teachers in the schools where they are desperately needed
  - Installing real accountability programs that will identify and either improve or remove low-performing teachers from the classroom.

### **Message to Kentucky leaders:**

- Kentucky's latest attempt at transforming its education system came in the form of Senate Bill 1.
  - Passed during the 2009 legislative session, the bill promises:
    - Curriculum for one grade would build on material taught in the previous grade.
    - New common-core standards would be developed that are different than KERA's mile wide-inch deep approach that gave many subjects the surface treatment rather than the deepness of core subjects demonstrated by programs like Singapore Math.

- Individual student performance would be tested and disclosed, although details are slim.
- Graduation from high school will mean something, as graduates will be fully prepared to enter college or the workforce.
- Like KERA, Senate Bill 1 gave Kentuckians hope for real change. But this important legislation can be undermined.
  - Right now, discussions about the new Common Core State Standard Assessment program are using terms and concepts that sound way too much like the failed ideas of our defunct KIRIS and CATS assessments.
  - Legislators must be vigilant to insure another costly testing mistake does not befall the commonwealth. Legislators and educators in Kentucky must understand they are at the bat now with two strikes – KIRIS and CATS – already on the scoreboard.

## **Conclusion**

*Accountability for results, vigilance instead of celebration and a focus on what's right for students is what's required to reform our schools and transform our children's future.*

*Our 20-year history of KERA advises caution concerning the assertions of educators. They do not have the kind of high quality research they need, and their past track record is not comforting.*

*When common sense indicates that educators are taking us down another dead-end street, it would be wise for legislators to pay attention – and maybe even grab the steering wheel – so that Progressives don't once again run down the collective future of our most precious Kentuckians – our children. .*

## **Author**

*— Jim Waters is vice president of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky's free-market think tank.*

## Endnotes:

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- <sup>11</sup> Data sources used to create Figure 13: Per Pupil Property Wealth by District and Total Revenues By District from Kentucky Office of Education Accountability, **2000 Annual Report**, Frankfort, Kentucky.
- <sup>12</sup> Data downloaded from the NAEP Data Explorer.
- <sup>13</sup> The ACT Composite Scores used to create Figure 3 were computed by the author from annual data reports of Kentucky public high school ACT scores provided to the Kentucky Office of Education Accountability by the ACT, Inc. Available online at: [http://www.freedomkentucky.org/index.php?title=ACT\\_Scores\\_in\\_Kentucky\\_by\\_Year](http://www.freedomkentucky.org/index.php?title=ACT_Scores_in_Kentucky_by_Year). The state average per pupil funding comes from the Kentucky Department of Education's "Annual Receipts and Expenditures Reports," online at: <http://www.education.ky.gov/KDE/Administrative+Resources/Finance+and+Funding/School+Finance/Financial+Information/Annual+Financial+Reports.htm>. The per-pupil funding amounts were adjusted using the US Census Bureau's CPI-U index, available online at: <ftp://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/cpi/cpi.txt>.
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- <sup>17</sup> Data in Table 1 was assembled from the individual Leadership Assessment Reports. Access to those reports with a link available at: <http://www.education.ky.gov/KDE/Administrative+Resources/School+Improvement/Leadership+Assessment/>.
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- <sup>39</sup> Quoted from the online Great-Quotations.com.