



Education fat cats start coughing up hairballs

By Jim Waters

(FRANKFORT, Ky.) — Bills filed in the Legislature this week signal unsettling days ahead for “educrats” who have an ingrained, all-consuming passion for preserving, protecting and defending the status quo.

Senate Bill 1 would replace the worthless \$10-million CATS testing program with a test that compares Kentucky student performance with their counterparts nationally and allows educators to determine whether students learn.

And House Bill 578 would create a plan for “legal” charter schools for the first time in Kentucky’s history.

First, let’s look at why some wise lawmakers want to let the CATS out of the bag. It seems, as the late American educator Laurence J. Peter noted, “. . . the quo has lost its status” with them.

This CATS with more than nine lives features padded results, lower standards and a score-reporting system that doesn’t allow parents to know how students perform until after a new school year starts. At that point, what’s a parent to do?

Noted education analyst Richard Innes says it’s time for CATS to be euthanized.

“Very simply, CATS is an outdated, expensive and under-performing system that’s too easily inflated at will by school interests, and it’s past time for this costly experiment to bow out,” Innes said.

Second, some lawmakers have listened to the strong arguments and data supporting school choice in Kentucky. The result is HB 578, which would allow local school boards, universities and even local governments to sponsor charter schools.

These publicly funded schools – operated by parent groups, teachers, individuals or even private organizations – have greater flexibility. They can use different curriculums, emphasize certain academic areas, have longer school days, require parental involvement and maintain strong discipline.

Despite what naysayers moan, school choice doesn’t just accommodate “cream-of-the-crop” students. In fact, HB 578 would require that all students have access to charter schools – just like a regular public school. And minority and low-income households send the most students to many of the nation’s best charter schools.

An excellent model for a charter school already exists in Bowling Green.

The Legislature approved \$3.3 million in 2006 for the Carol Martin Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science – a charter school on Western Kentucky University’s campus.

Public money educates the academy students – just like it would in charter schools. The teachers union can't control it, and the most stifling state regulations largely don't apply to it, again, like most successful charter schools. All this works at the academy, despite the fact that no Kentucky law exists allowing such schools.

Is that legal?

WKU's academy sits in the district of Speaker of the House Jody Richards, D-Bowling Green. I wonder if the speaker plans on continuing to allow the illegal school to exist – or if he will let legal charter schools join it.

While all remains quiet on the “Western” front, an eerie silence hangs over the education fiefdom in Frankfort, too.

I suspect the reason for the “silence of the scams” is because the labor bosses at the Kentucky Education Association, the state teachers union, cannot figure out a way to oppose HB 578, sponsored by Lexington Rep. Stan Lee, R-Lexington, the labor bosses' philosophical opposite. Attacking the bill would curry the displeasure from many in the education community who sing the praises of WKU's academy.

So why should only a select few students get the monopoly on the quality education offered by the WKU academy?

Its Web site describes the academy as “a beacon of excellence for Kentucky and a testament to the infinite possibilities that lie ahead for some of the state's brightest young minds.”

If we accept that “infinite possibilities” lie ahead for 120 students lucky enough to gain entrance to WKU's academy, how do the possibilities and opportunities stack up for the rest of the state's 657,000 students?

Weigh that question against the infinite ways bungling bureaucrats and placating politicians muddle up education in Kentucky. Then get on the phone and let your lawmakers know how you feel.

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. You can read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.