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Whither Education in Kentucky: The Challenges and Promises for the 21st Century

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WHITHER EDUCATION IN KENTUCKY: CHALLENGES AND PROMISES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

From its founding in 1792, the Commonwealth of Kentucky, compared with the states north of the Ohio River, followed a typically southern style of education. Before the Civil War a slave oligarchy controlled the political destiny of the state. After the Civil War, ironically because two-thirds of Kentuckians who fought in that war were on the Union side, the state became even more southern in many ways. Racism and segregation prevailed until the mid-1950s when the state began making rapid and successful strides to integrate its public and private schools.¹

Equity and equality have always been stumbling blocks for education in Kentucky. From the state's founding if you came from a middle class family your chances of getting a creditable education in Kentucky have been good. However, if you came from a poor family, a rural area, particularly in eastern Kentucky, or were female or African-American, your chances were considerably diminished. These problems appear to have abated in more recent years. More progress will be made, but only if funding by state government exceeds national averages, allowing the state to reach parity with those states which are also improving their systems.²

Kentucky stands again at a crossroads in educating its children, young people and adults. Educational performance tended to improve in the past two decades because of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (1990) and other important legislation. While elementary and middle school students have shown improvement in more recent years in math and science, there seems to be a disconnect when students enter high school, where too many drop out before graduation. Moreover, in the fall of 2011, Kentucky college and university enrollments stagnated.³

¹ William E. Ellis, *A History of Education in Kentucky*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011, Chapters 1-7.

² *Ibid.*, "Epilogue."

³ *Lexington Herald-Leader*, September 29, 2011; *Richmond Register*, November 2, 2011.

As has happened many times in our history, and as chronicled in my book, *A History of Education in Kentucky*, the tendency has been to make progress but soon slide into a barren zone of complacency. And in many respects, Kentucky shares much the same problems as do other states. What one educationist has called “the leakiest segment of the education pipeline” is the dropout rate in grades 10-14 (with freshmen and sophomore higher education years considered as grades 13 and 14) is indeed problematic.⁴

Besides the deplorable dropout rate of high school students, nearly 50 percent of those Kentuckians who make it into higher education institutions are required to take one or more remedial courses as freshmen. Moreover, in 2007, 40% of Kentucky students did not make the required grade point average of 2.5 in order to keep their Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship provided by the Kentucky State Lottery. This proves that many Kentucky high schools have been graduating students who are not well-qualified for higher education academics.⁵

High school and higher education are connected. Though most Kentucky higher education institutions do not qualify as so-called “dropout factories,” for example, nationally two-thirds of entering freshmen do not graduate in six years. A 2010 study indicated that only 37.5 % of ECU’s entering freshmen graduated in that time frame. Even at the University of Kentucky, the state’s flagship university, less than 60 percent of entering freshmen graduated in six years.⁶ The grades 10-14 dropout rates severely handicap Kentucky’s efforts to reach a goal of doubling the number of citizens holding a baccalaureate degree to 800,000 by 2020 or increasing ECU’s undergraduate enrollment to at least 20,000 a year.⁷

This is a national problem. The United States, compared with other industrial nations, ranks 20th in high school completion and 16th in the number of its citizens

⁴ Kevin Carey, “College for All,” *The Atlantic* (Autumn 2011), 48-51.

⁵ Ellis, 419.

⁶ *Lexington Herald-Leader*, September 30, 2011.

⁷ Ellis, “Epilogue.”

finishing a four-year higher education program.⁸ How do we find our way out of this educational impasse?

Not all American students can or should go to college, but all should receive the opportunity to achieve the equivalent of a high school diploma or its equivalent. Those who do go on to higher education should be well-equipped for the task and not need remedial work.

First, stress on preschool through grade 12 education should be improved with the most current electronic and education advances. Time in school is still mostly based on “seat time,” whether completing units in high school or class hours in higher education. “Defined competencies” as used by the Western Governors University, including online courses, should find its way into the educational mainstream. Though “virtual schools” offer few boundaries to a well-motivated student, the classroom experience must remain the central cores of any level of education.⁹

The problems are daunting. Kentucky must develop a “culture” that appreciates educational attainment for all its citizens. This costs money and the commitment of the state government. Bob Sexton, longtime executive director of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, once said: “I think the idea of getting every child in a situation where they have a highly talented, well-trained, well-supported teacher [in] a good learning environment, is just daunting.” There is also a dropout problem among teachers, especially among beginning instructors, because of lower salaries for teachers entering the field.¹⁰

The key in public school education is placing a well-motivated teacher who does not have to worry about finances in a healthy classroom with an optimum number of students. Then the magic of education happens.

Completion of high school has far-reaching sociological implications. Studies in the United States, Britain, and Italy have shown that “one extra year of high school

⁸ Charles W. Steger, “America’s Global Economic Stature at Risk,” *Virginia Tech Magazine*, 33 (Spring 2011), n.p.

⁹ Carey, 51.

¹⁰ Ellis, “Whither Education in Kentucky,” *Kentucky Monthly* (March 2011), 56; *Richmond Register*, December 19, 2011.

reduced arrest rates for young men by about 11 percent.” It is important for Kentucky to raise the high school attending age to eighteen. Prior to the 2012 meeting of the Kentucky General Assembly, Kentucky was one of only 19 states without an 18 year-old attendance law. Daily school attendance is also a problem in Kentucky. Many white middle class citizens do not realize that poorer students may work many hours a week at minimum wages as well as attend school. Often they are stressed to do both well. Studies show that students who miss more than 20 days a year are persistent low-achievers.¹¹

Though not everyone can attain a college degree, it remains the best indicator of economic security for an individual. The repercussions since the beginning of the 2008 economic “meltdown” have particularly hit non-college educated males the hardest, even being called a “man-cession” by one writer owing to high unemployment in male-dominated construction and manufacturing trades and industry.

Women, particularly those with higher education degrees, have made great strides in recent years, numerically passing men with undergraduate and graduate degrees. Though still behind men in pay, the percentage moved from 64 percent in 2000 to 78.2 percent in 2011 for women with full-time jobs.¹²

The sociological implications of this are important. For some time, well-educated African-American women have found it increasingly difficult to find a similarly well-educated black spouse. This trend may now be developing in the white community. Many women are now opting out of marriage as their lives no longer depend on male financial support.¹³

Some pundits, both liberal and conservative, fear that the nature of the American middle class is in dire straits of being lost with the country increasingly divided into haves and have-nots. Depending on political persuasion, each is using this issue to their advantage in local, state, and national political campaigns.¹⁴

¹¹ *Wilson Quarterly* (Winter 2011), 65; *Lexington Herald-Leader*, November 9, 2011.

¹² *Lexington Herald-Leader*, April 27, 2011.

¹³ Kate Bolick, “All the Single Ladies,” *The Atlantic* (November 2011), 116-36.

¹⁴ Don Peck, “Can the Middle Class be Saved?” *The Atlantic* (September 2011), 60-78; *Lexington Herald-Leader*, November 6, 2011.

The author has other concerns about developments in education today. For example, has education been cheapened? Is America becoming a society where, as Garrison Keillor says: “All the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” Every time the author gives a talk about education to a group of older Americans, someone will always bring up the old adage that the best grading system is one based on the Bell Curve, or some such system.

The life of the child in America has always been in a state of flux. Have children forgotten how to play or do they ever learn on their own without direct adult supervision, what the author calls the result of the regimentation of “Little League Syndrome.” Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn would have gone insane in today’s world of the child. Other writers have expounded on what some of them term “the cult of self-esteem” that we have inflicted on children. David Brooks argues that “today’s grads enter a cultural climate that preaches the self as the center of life.” This, of course, leaves out the need to be a team player and having a concern for the well-being of others. Howard P. Chudacoff’s *Children at Play: An American History* reads like *Brave New World* in many ways. Addiction to video games and childhood obesity are rampant.¹⁵

Other problems plague education in Kentucky and the nation at large. Cheating at all levels of education is also a major problem. I have read too many reports of students cheating on ACT and other tests, or having surrogates take tests for them, and outright lying to be admitted to prestigious colleges and universities. The pseudonymous “Ed Dante” who wrote “The Shadow Scholar” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* told about how he routinely produced papers, including theses and dissertations, even for those students in seminaries, for a handsome fee. Because there is so much money involved and a lowering of the ethics of scholarship, there must be many more Ed Dantes than academicians would like to admit. With many students at all levels ascribing to what the author calls a “Wikipedia Mentality,” the problem may be almost irreparable. The

¹⁵ Lori Gottlieb, “How to Land Your Kid in Therapy,” *The Atlantic* (July/August, 2011), 64-78; *Lexington Herald-Leader*, November 6, 2011; *New York Times*, May 31, June 2, 2010.

internet has produced a mentality among many that anything in the medium must be of academic quality.¹⁶

There are other specific deficiencies that plague Kentucky education. Kentucky is a relatively small, poor state. There was no Duke family as in North Carolina or Vanderbilt family to found a great private university. Many Kentuckians do not realize that the commonwealth is a federal tax negative state. In other words, Kentucky receives back about \$1.25 or more for each dollar that its citizens contribute to federal revenue coffers. Education at all levels in Kentucky heavily depends on federal money.

As it affects public higher education, state historian James C. Klotter wrote in 2006: “Currently the state ranks fourteenth nationally in highway spending, but last in education spending per person. The will to build better roads, and to fund other things, still remains stronger than the will to build—and maintain—a better higher education system. Asphalt often seems more valued than a young mind.”¹⁷

Kentucky politics and education have been inextricably mixed since the late eighteenth century. The founding, funding, and manipulation of Transylvania University until the early 20th century brought great promise in its early years, but that institution nearly foundered on the pyre of Kentucky political and sectarian religious strife. Though not solely a Kentucky trait, we should be reminded of the words written by James H. Mulligan (1902), who after extolling the many wonderful things about the commonwealth concluded: “And politics, the damnedest in Kentucky.”¹⁸

A reading of *A History of Education in Kentucky* reveals the inherent dangers of the nexus of politics and education in Kentucky. For many years a school trustee and then sub-trustee dominated particularly the rural one-room schools. This system Thomas D. Clark called the “black beast of Kentucky educational history from 1838-1920.” Violence has sometimes attended the election of local school officials. County governments have often-times been ruled as “little kingdoms” by one person or a small clique. With the

¹⁶ *Richmond Register*, November, 24, 2011; Ed Dante, “The Shadow Scholar,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (November 12, 2010) as read on *The Chronicle Review* Website.

¹⁷ Ellis, 422.

¹⁸ Ellis, 147, 158, 209, 264.

school system as the largest employer in a county, the local school superintendent, for good or ill, became the major political broker, developing his or her personal fiefdom. The system to the present day has been corrupted by unethical and sometimes criminal officials. Even now, school boards are elected and they in turn appoint the school superintendent. The reforms of later years have not rationalized this system into one that is still not fraught with political considerations.¹⁹

Though altered somewhat by the reforms of the administration of Governor Paul Patton (1997), politics still plays a role in the appointment of regents and trustees and presidents serve at the behest of those boards. However, Kentucky governors no longer personally strong arm boards into appointing their choices as presidents.²⁰

Kentucky is at a crossroads. What can be done to advance education at all levels in the commonwealth?

It cannot be emphasized enough that the problems of equity and equality still exist. The odds have always been stacked against the poorest citizens of our state. Deitrich Bonhoeffer once said: “The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children.” Nearly one in four Kentucky children lives in poverty. In 2011 more than 556,000 Kentucky students relied on the School Lunch Program. Children from a background of poverty in Kentucky do worse on statewide achievement tests. Today, nationwide, if family income is \$90,000 or above the chance is one in two of graduation from college. If family income is less than \$35,000, the chances diminish to one in seventeen.²¹

Kentucky is divided into the Golden Triangle, from northern Kentucky to Madison County to Jefferson County, and the Problem Crescent, which covers all of the Kentucky mountain counties over to the Mississippi River. Within the latter are cities and

¹⁹ Ellis, *passim*; *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 744-77.

²⁰ Ellis, Chapters 2, 4, 6, 8.

²¹ *Lexington Herald-Leader*, September 29, October 29, November 30, 2011, February 4, 2012; *Richmond Register*, October 19, 2011; Ellis, “Epilogue.”

towns that are prosperous, but many small towns and counties in the Problem Crescent are losing population, tax base, and have declining school age children.

Great gains have been made nationally, particularly since the mid-twentieth century when only half of white and one-quarter of black students graduated from high school, but there is still so much to be done to give educational opportunities to all Kentuckians.

Though school desegregation has at least followed the letter of the law and school consolidation has created more efficient public school systems, not all of this is of a positive nature. With 120 counties and over 50 independent school districts is it time to combine these for greater efficiency. Consolidation of districts (often richer and poorer ones share a border) would be a more efficient system of funding schools by reducing administrative costs. There are still too many poor districts that have to overly depend on SEEK funds to fund their schools.

It is time to consolidate school districts with several counties and the independent districts within then into single districts. While districts should be consolidated the trend should continue of having smaller schools. Bigger is not always better in school size.

The dropout rates of grades 10-14 can only be drastically reduced with innovation. At the time of the writing of this article new methods of computation for high school dropout rates were being explored by the Kentucky Department of Education. However, the “graduation rate” for Kentucky high school students in 2008-09 was 83.91 percent, a figure indicating a “dropout rate” of slightly over 16 percent statewide. More should be done to integrate a system into which “seat time” is not the primary measure of student success. An 18 year-old school attendance mandate, if well-funded by the General Assembly, will go a long way to alleviate the grades 10-12 dropout problem. Students who are college bound must be identified as early in their school careers as possible. When they enter a public or private school of higher education they should not need remedial work if their high schools were properly doing their business.²²

²² *Lexington Herald-Leader*, July 31, 2011.

Thomas D. Clark used to maintain that an inherent problem in Kentucky was what he termed “rurality.” As Kentucky has become more urban, rurality may have diminished. Many citizens of the commonwealth identify as “Kentuckian,” in no small part because of their attachment to University of Kentucky basketball, but they still have an immediate allegiance to what I term “localism.”

There are other problems of education in Kentucky that can be alleviated by thoughtful reform. The school day and the school year must be lengthened to keep up with (actually catch up with) the educational systems of the industrialized developed world. School facilities are not used efficiently. What one critic has called the “three sacred cows of June, July, and August” continues to waste time and taxpayer money. These months of school inactivity made sense when Kentucky and much of the nation was rural and children were needed for farm work. We are now an urban society for the most part. Why not make better use of schools year-around? (With only a hint of sarcasm, one might think that the school year now depends on athletic schedules and not the needs of a postmodern society.)²³

The testing of students is becoming increasingly expensive and a big business. Many critics believe there is too much testing to the detriment of quality instructional time. The rule of testing should be “what gets tested is what gets taught,” according to Richard P. Phelps. In the wake of the overturning of NCLB, Kentucky and the nation must soon arrive at one method of assessing student progress and teacher efficiency.²⁴

Why not use the ability to pass Algebra II as a primary, but not the only prerequisite, for admission to college? Why not use PISA, the Program for International Student Assessment, as our basic way of assessing student achievement? This would also tell how our teachers are performing.²⁵

Public higher education is being priced beyond the means of many poorer Kentuckians. The average debt for a college graduate today is approaching \$25,000

²³ “The Conversation,” *The Atlantic* (September 2010), 16.

²⁴ *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, August 9, 2011; Richard P. Phelps, “Teach to the Test?” *The Atlantic* (Autumn 2011), 42.

²⁵ Amanda Ripley, “The World’s Schoolmaster,” *The Atlantic* (July/August 2011), 109-10.

nationally. Many students who do not graduate from college are defaulting on their loans. The increasing costs of attending even a “School of Opportunity,” where historically the poorest students attended such as Eastern are outpacing the abilities of many students to attend them. In the fall of 2011, Kentucky public undergraduate enrollments showed only a one percent increase and graduate enrollments no increase. Eastern Kentucky University undergraduate enrollment was 2 percent below the fall of 2010. Even KCTCS, which in the not too distant past increased by double digits from one year to the next, only increased by 1 percent in that time period. The old maxim that in poor economic times more young people automatically return to college may be a thing of the past.²⁶

There appear to be some bright spots in education as Kentucky moves into the second decade of the 21st century. The “Quality Counts” assessment of early 2012 gave the state a C+ overall on its public school education performance. While the state received excellent grades for school accountability, higher teacher quality, and educational standards and testing, it received an F for “actual education funding,” the old bugaboo that has plagued Kentucky throughout its history. Higher education graduation rates appear to be rising with the state moving from 44th to 35th in six-year graduation rates for four year institutions in 2011. However, still only about 17 percent of Kentuckians have bachelor’s degrees.²⁷

In the lifetime of the author such programs as the G.I. Bill of Rights, the Minimum Foundation Program, KERA, and the higher education reforms of the Patton administration gave an added boost to educational opportunity in Kentucky.

It is time again to make bold moves to improve educational opportunity in Kentucky. Not to do so would be to allow Kentucky to lapse into the old pattern of taking a step backward for every two steps forward in education achievement.

²⁶ *Lexington Herald-Leader*, July 17, September 23, October 19, November 27, 2011.

²⁷ *Lexington Herald-Leader*, September 8, 2011, March 5, 2012.