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ON SCHOOL FUNDING, STATE IS INADEQUATE

Lexington Herald-Leader (KY) - Monday, March 24, 2003

Author: Richard Day

The Fayette County delegation to the Kentucky House of Representatives recently wrote to the Fayette County Superintendent and Board of Education regarding the current budget woes.

The delegation wants the school board to shut up and do its job (cut the budget).

They complained that it is "not appropriate" for school folks to encourage taxpayers to contact their elected representatives and complain about inadequate funding for our schools.

The delegation claims they have gone to "extraordinary lengths to provide the resources and means" to give our children the programs they deserve.

Frankly, I'm stunned by the heavy-handed arrogance and shortsightedness of their position.

The extraordinary lengths they claim to have gone are a fantasy. It is as though their only standard for excellence is passage of a budget (a year late) that somewhat exceeded what the governor had proposed for education.

This falls well short of the constitutional mandate required by the Supreme Court in *Rose v. Council for Better Education*.

In school funding cases, the court sees "adequacy" as an issue of whether schools have the resources necessary to meet the goals set by the state. When our expectations are low, bare sufficiency may well provide adequacy.

However, Kentucky's goal of a proficient education for each and every child is no easy standard. Adequate support for Kentucky's children must be sufficient in quality and quantity to assure that all schools meet the needs of all students.

Until the Supreme Court ruling in *Rose*, and the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act, the legislature had happily contented itself to underfund a very modest system of schools for the benefit of most of its students.

KERA stands as the General Assembly's great historical triumph -- the first time Kentucky ever earned national recognition for educational excellence.

Kentucky climbed from 49th to 36th in support of its schools and conditions began to improve for children, but more recently, our legislators have been content to allow the system to slip once again.

The Office of Educational Accountability has been informing the General Assembly since 1994 that the promise of KERA has not yet been achieved.

Since that time they have advocated steady increases in school funding. But time and time again, our legislators have ignored calls for more support for capital outlay, debt service, special education and teachers' salaries.

The salary increases mandated in this past session -- nine years after the OEA recommendation -- were done in such a way that Fayette County will apparently not even benefit.

It is also notable that the legislature is considering elimination of the OEA -- the very office the General Assembly had been ignoring.

I guess some folks are just getting tired of hearing it. This would be particularly sad because the OEA stands as the General Assembly's visible symbol to all educators that any retreat from excellence would be dealt with seriously.

When school districts are inadequately funded, school boards are forced to cut programs. The district's principals have said with one voice, "Don't cut programs that directly touch children." If funds were sufficient, the board would not be talking about cutting at all.

In fairness, the delegation's claim that Fayette County failed to take the steps necessary to qualify for school construction funds is accurate.

Neither have we levied local taxes sufficient to address our facilities needs. The board took strong, appropriate action on the first matter, and I hope will soon address the second.

While it may be amusing to watch those in power above us blame each other and make excuses, in the end, it is disheartening.

Those of us at the school level know that no matter who ultimately gets blamed, we're the ones who must be here for the children.

We are reminded daily, there can be no excuses for failure. The legislature, the school board -- everyone -- must do his or her job, so that we can do ours.

Caption: - **Richard Day**

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