

WHAT'S RIGHT WITH KENTUCKY'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

With the release of the film *Waiting for Superman*, discussion and analysis of the public school system is growing. Much of what people are talking about is negative – low test scores, poor-quality instruction, unsafe schools, a lack of resources and more.

But there are some bright spots in Kentucky's public education system, and those should be publicized.

- **Public schools are a bargain.** In Kentucky, school districts average spending about \$8,800 per student each year. That's about \$49 per day, or about \$8 per hour.
 - Our schools meet the needs of all students, particularly those with special needs. In the "good old days," children with disabilities were given little attention. Now, children receive services tailored to their needs in state-funded preschool programs, enabling them to enter kindergarten and 1st grade prepared and able to progress with their peers.
 - Plus, remember the intangible value that schools bring to their communities. Schools serve as polling places on election days and emergency shelters in times of disaster, provide adult learning opportunities and meeting space, and, through the Family Resource and Youth Services Centers, offer support and resources to needy families.
- **Our public schools are better than ever.** An April 2009 study by the Kentucky Long Term Policy Research Center said, "Compared to our past and relative to the nation, these data show significant educational progress. Kentucky has moved from the bottom fifth of states in educational performance to the bottom third." Based on the center's National Education Index, Kentucky's ranking moved from 43rd in 1992 to 35th in 2007. The study concluded, "The index shows that Kentucky has made educational improvements over the years and gained ground on other states."
- **Academic performance is improving.** According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, or the "Nation's Report Card"), Kentucky children are performing better in comparison to their peers nationally than they ever have before. The results of the 2009 NAEP in reading showed that Kentucky's 4th and 8th graders made significant gains when compared to the state's performance in previous NAEP assessments. According to NAEP, Kentucky was one of three states that had a statistically significant increase in 4th-grade reading scores from 2007 to 2009. Kentucky was also one of nine states that had a statistically significant increase in 8th-grade reading scores from 2007 to 2009. Kentucky was the only state in the nation to report increases in both 4th- and 8th-grade reading scores. A June 2008 study by the Center on Education Policy indicated that Kentucky was one of four states to show consistent moderate-to-large

gains in NAEP scores at all levels since 2002, indicating that achievement has improved across the board.

- Student performance on state-level testing has improved, too. Since 2007, the percentage of students scoring at proficient and distinguished on the Kentucky Core Content Tests has risen by an average of six points at the elementary level; four points at the middle school level; and four-and-a-half points at the high school level.
- In Kentucky, the number of students taking the ACT test has increased significantly from 24,942 in 1990 to 41,277 in 2010. This is due in part to the requirement that all public school juniors take the ACT.
- Results from the first administration of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS), given to students in grades 3-7 in the 2009-10 school year, show striking results. At nearly every grade level in both reading and mathematics, scores were above the 50th percentile. These results are remarkable and atypical for the administration of norm-referenced tests.
- **Nonacademic indicators are improving, too.** Since 1993, Kentucky's public school dropout rate has decreased – from more than five percent to less than three percent – and the actual number of dropouts has decreased by more than 3,000.
- The state's graduation rate has improved. In 2001, it stood at 79.72 percent. In 2009, it was nearly 84 percent.
- Of those who do graduate, more are pursuing some sort of postsecondary education. In 1993, approximately 54 percent of graduates went on to college or vocational/technical education. In 2009, that increased to 63 percent.
- **Kentucky has seen improvements in teacher quality as well.** More than 2,000 Kentucky teachers have earned National Board certification, and Kentucky now ranks in the top ten nationwide in the total number of National Board Certified Teachers.
 - According to the National Center for Education Statistics, as of 2008, 57.5 percent of Kentucky's public school teachers held master's degrees. Kentucky has the seventh-highest percentage of teachers with master's degrees in the United States.
 - Of the nearly 100,000 employees in Kentucky's public school system, about two-thirds are directly involved in providing instruction to children. From classroom teachers to library media specialists to instructional aides, Kentucky's schools are focused on delivering learning.

Yes, Kentucky's public schools, like those across the nation, need improvement. But, we've come a long way in the past two decades. We should not remain complacent or be satisfied

with the progress we've made, but use our successes and experience to continue to move forward.