



Media Contact:
Jessica Fletcher
Communications Manager
(w) 502-848-8731
(c) 859-539-0511
jfletcher@kychamber.com

Kentucky's Schools: A New Reality

**By Dave Adkisson
President and CEO,
Kentucky Chamber of Commerce**

How many times have we heard that Kentucky ranks in the low 40s among the 50 states on all sorts of national lists – education, workforce skills, smoking, obesity, etc.? In the early 1990s, before the big school reforms, the phrase “Thank God for Mississippi” struck a chord with Kentuckians who were in a seemingly permanent state of gloom over our failing schools.

Back then, business and education leaders started touring the Commonwealth with the message that, “We’re 49th and we’re not going to take it any more!” They were trying to rally support for massive school reform. A landmark state Supreme Court decision, a lot of grassroots support for reform, and a strong dose of political courage in Frankfort led to the most comprehensive reform of public education in the country, the Kentucky Education Reform Act.

For the past two years, I’ve traveled the state and talked to hundreds of business, education, political and community leaders, and I’ve tried to get a handle on whether we’ve made progress in education and, if so, how much. That has proved to be a difficult task. I have concluded that, as average Kentuckians, we simply don’t know.

A conversation about educational progress (or lack thereof) can quickly become a mind-numbing discussion of test scores, which test scores, funding, spending, accountability, governance, and other matters. For the 99.9 percent of us who are not professional educators, our eyes quickly glaze over and we end up bewildered, not knowing whether we’ve made progress or not.

One news story about ACT scores sounds pretty good, and then we hear how few Kentucky workers have a bachelor’s or associate degree. We don’t know whether to feel good or feel bad.

The recent release of a study by the Kentucky Long-Term Policy Research Center sheds a bright light on the question of progress and, more important, offers reason for hope and optimism. The LTPRC took 11 major national rankings that are widely accepted as important measures of student achievement, combined them into a single index and charted them from the early 1990s through 2005, the latest year for which the rankings are available.

What the combined index reveals is dramatic. Kentucky has made impressive progress in education, and we have clearly moved out of the bottom tier and toward the middle of the pack of all states. Overall, we moved from 43rd in 1992 to 34th in 2005. The move is even more impressive when we look at what happened to some other states, especially those who shared the basement with Kentucky in 1992: Alabama moved from 48th to 46th. Mississippi moved from 50th to 48th. North Carolina—often cited as an example of what Kentucky should try to be—began in 42nd place and moved up to 35th, one slot below Kentucky.

Other recent reports support the positive conclusions about Kentucky: our fourth- and eighth-graders are performing above the national average in science and reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often called the nation’s report card.

Education Week's Quality Counts 2007 Achievement Index ranks Kentucky at 34th and the Morgan Quitno 2006-07 Smartest State Index ranks Kentucky at 31st.

This is huge! Kentucky's schools have made major gains in less than one generation. And we have proved that with a concentrated and sustained public effort to help all students learn at high levels, our schools can—and do—improve.

The gains are even more impressive when considered against the backdrop of Kentucky's high poverty level, the influx into our public schools of thousands of immigrants (many of whom are still learning English) and the low education levels of our adult population. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce recently gave Kentucky a "B" in its national report card for "return on investment." In other words, for the tax dollars we're investing into education, we're getting a good dividend in student achievement.

Are there areas that still need attention? Absolutely. I don't think many of us are going to rush out and paste "We're No. 34!" bumper stickers on our cars to celebrate our new rankings.

The research study shows that we still lag well behind the top states in too many categories, and there is an unacceptable achievement gap between low-income and minority students vs. the general student population. More than half our college freshmen at state universities require remedial help in at least one subject. And not enough college students graduate. Out of every 100 Kentucky ninth-graders, only 12 receive an associate degree in three years or a bachelor's degree in six. Moreover, our economic rankings of earnings and personal wealth don't paint the picture we want.

There are countless education statistics out there – more than enough to make anyone dizzy trying to make sense out of them. But there are enough reliable numbers from outside sources to paint a clear picture: Kentucky has made remarkable progress.

After generations of lagging behind and feeling a strong sense of defeatism, the citizens of Kentucky did rally and the effort has produced solid results. Just like the old assumed reality that "Kentucky is not a football state," we have seen how winning some important games can redefine our expectations. We now can see how a few indicators of success in education can lead to another new reality. We taste success and we want more. We think differently about what to expect.

Yes, our challenges are huge: funding, cultural barriers to achievement, achievement gaps, teacher shortages. The list goes on and on. But we can't stop now. Parents have to be involved with their children's learning. Principals have to provide leadership. Teachers have to stay motivated and care about each student's progress. Legislators have to provide funding in spite of huge pressures from other quarters. Businesses have to be engaged and communicate with schools about the skills their employees must have.

We must continue to push for Kentucky students to have the educational opportunities that will raise their standard of living and help them participate as contributing citizens. We're moving in the right direction; we just can't let up!

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