

KERA UPDATE

January 1998

#21

Kentucky Education Review for 1997

WHY KENTUCKY IS IMPORTANT

Virtually every idea in education reform has been in progress in Kentucky for seven years. From multi-age elementary schools — to inclusion of kids with disabilities in regular classrooms and testing — to high stakes accountability — almost all the current fads in education can be found in the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA).

Radical education reformers cite Kentucky as an example to encourage similar changes in virtually every other state in the country. Unfortunately, the material presented by these reformers is usually seriously biased or, in far too many cases, completely fallacious.

In addition, Dr. Wilmer S. Cody, the Kentucky Commissioner of Education, now heads three highly influential national education organizations: (1) The committee developing the National Tests in 4th Grade Reading and 8th Grade Science, (2) the National Commission for Accreditation of Teacher Education, and (3) the Council of Chief State School Officers. This provides obvious pathways for radical ideas from Kentucky, regardless of merit and proved effectiveness, to be pushed into other states.

So, it's important to understand the current status of education health in Kentucky. For, while Kentucky's population is small, the impacts of KERA are clearly national in scope.

THE BIG NEWS: KIRIS TEST NOW IN REAL TROUBLE!

— **Testing Mistake Causes \$1.5 Million Overrun**

— **Kentucky Fires Testing Contractor**

In April of 1997, the Kentucky Commissioner of Education announced that he was firing the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System's testing contractor, Advanced Systems in Measurement and Evaluation of Dover, NH. KIRIS is the highly reform-oriented assessment program that was started in Kentucky in 1992 (See story, page 2). ASME statisticians made a major mistake in calculating the KIRIS scores for every elementary and middle school in the state. ASME's error awarded erroneously low scores to virtually all those schools.

Unfortunately, the mistake was discovered after the \$25 million reward fund had already been divided and distributed. As a result, \$1.5 million in extra reward money had to be requested from the legislature to "make good" earned rewards to teachers. Without ASME's mistake, this extra money would have been unnecessary because the originally allocated reward fund would have been properly divided the first time.

Claiming that the mistake was purely a statistical error, the Commissioner of Education stated the KIRIS test was still basically sound. He then invoked a questionable use of emergency authority

to let new contracts with some of the ASME subcontractors so the KIRIS testing for 1997 could continue.

— **Legislature Votes Major Audit**

While the news was breaking about the ASME firing, the Kentucky Legislature was already considering a limited audit of certain aspects of KIRIS following the 1996 collapse of the Performance Events. Announcement of the latest KIRIS problems added considerable tension to the discussions. Legislators quickly expanded the audit to cover virtually all aspects of KIRIS. In addition, Department of Education management was added to the list of audit topics. A professional auditing firm began the work in the Summer of 1997. This now extensive audit was due to report on the 31st of December, too late for comment in this *KERA UPDATE*. However, considering the tumultuous events of 1997, it seems likely the audit will contain extensive criticism for all parties involved in KIRIS when the report is released.

— **Kentucky's Head Commissioner for Testing Resigns**

Dr. Ed Reidy, head of the KIRIS program since its inception, resigned at the end of December, 1997. He will work for Pew Charitable Trusts. Pew has spent millions of dollars pushing Kentucky's reforms.

— **College Professors Pan Math**

MORE ON KIRIS:

Background KIRIS is Kentucky's home-grown, high stakes assessment program. It uses open response (only!) tests for Math, Writing, Reading, Science, Social Studies, Arts and Humanities, and Practical Living. KIRIS also includes Writing Portfolios. Up to now, multiple choice questions have never been a formal part of the KIRIS accountability formula. There is a plan to include them; however, under the present schedule, multiple choice won't impact school accountability until after the turn of the century.

Aside from academic testing, KIRIS includes several "non-cognitive indicators" including dropouts, retentions, attendance, and an interesting item called Transition to Adult Life (for high school graduates). Transition is supposed to indicate the percentage of kids who get a job, go on to college, and so forth.

KIRIS Has Been Highly Unstable Initially, all testing and portfolio work was conducted at Grades 4, 8 and 12. That changed in 1995 when high school testing shifted to 11th grade. More changes in testing points occurred since. In 1997, testing was split between Grades 4 and 5 and Grades 7 and 8. Thus, age groups tested have been quite unstable.

There were other major changes to KIRIS. Math Portfolios were deleted in 1997. Performance Events died in 1996.

All these changes to KIRIS create serious stability issues, and KIRIS stability is critical. KIRIS is based on changes in school performance. Can an accurate picture of the change in school performance be developed with an evaluation program that isn't stable from year to year? Is it fair to use such an unstable assessment to make high stakes decisions about rewarding and sanctioning schools and teachers?

Portfolios, Don't Want Them Back

One of the most controversial parts of the original KIRIS program was a specialized set of written portfolios in mathematics. These ran into withering criticism from the outset as taking too much time away from more important aspects of math instruction.

Math Portfolios were used for assessment for four years in Kentucky and did count in the 1994-95-96 Biennium. In 1996, the Legislature voted Math Portfolios out of the assessment program following extensive protests from parents and math teachers.

In the Fall of 1997, a new consortium of college math professors and business leaders from Northern Kentucky issued a strongly worded report about both the math portfolios and the general quality of math training for recent high school graduates. Concerned by Freshman college math remediation requirements now running up to 70% at some Kentucky colleges, the group called for a number of important changes in the public school math program. One of the key recommendations, the math portfolios should not be brought back — ever!

— Performance Events Are Still Out

One of the most radical parts of the KIRIS program was the use of Performance Events for assessment. Performance Events involved giving a problem to small groups of students to work together. Then, each child wrote an individual report and these were later graded by the testing contractor. Performance Events proved so unreliable that the KY Board of Education formally voted them out of the program in August, 1996. Performance Events died because of very unusual results for 8th Graders — on a scale of 0 to 140, the average 8th Grade score worked out to only 3 or so. Again, stability of the KIRIS results were impacted.

WHAT DO THE KIRIS

RESULTS LOOK LIKE? The "Mid-Term" KIRIS results for the "Third Biennium" were issued in December,

1997. These showed impressive gains for schools. Grade 4 scores rose from 35.7 to 49.0 from 1993 to 1997 (a 37% increase). For the same years, middle schools rose from 37.4 to 45.6 and high schools were up from 34.9 to 50.4 (increases of 22% and 44% respectively).

The new 1997 scores must be averaged with 1998 scores before new school ratings are issued; so, only preliminary analysis is available. However, a lot more is known about the 1996 scores, and some of that is worth discussion.

When the 1996 scores released, it was immediately apparent that something unsettling was present in the results, even absent the highly unreliable Performance Events.

The most startling observation concerned the 8th Grade scores. Four out of five 8th Grade schools had score declines between 1995 and 1996. With big bucks in rewards and the threat of school takeover and probation for teachers at seriously declining schools in the balance, these 8th Grade results are especially puzzling. In fact, 5 of the 9 schools that were taken over by the state following the release of the 1996 KIRIS were middle schools (2 were elementary, 2 were high schools). Overall, middle schools met only 53% of their KIRIS improvement goal, sharply down from the 85% figure posted in the first Biennium. The Mid-Biennium 1997 results indicate there will be little change in trends from the Second Biennium when Third Biennium scores release next year.

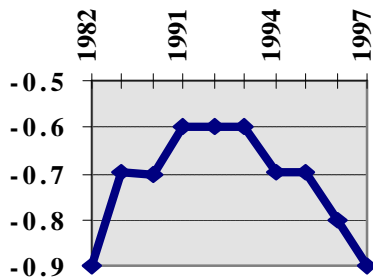
One of the more interesting studies to come out after the 1996 KIRIS was a look at how the 8th Grade schools performed on only the academic parts of KIRIS (without non-cognitives or performance events included). It turned out that 8th Grade teachers in combined schools with both 4th and 8th Grades got rewards even though the 8th-Grade-only performance of those schools had suffered significant decline. Still, the entire school gets rewards under KIRIS, so the Kentucky taxpayer enriched 8th Grade teachers whose students' scores took a nose dive. {Source: *KY School Boards Association*}

ACT SCORES — HOW GOES IT? The graph below shows Kentucky's

ACT performance relative to the national average. It is evident that Kentucky's ACT performance has declined since KERA began impacting the classroom around 1992.

The ACT situation becomes clearer when two subgroups of Kentucky ACT takers are examined. From 1991 to 1997, ACT scores for Kentucky's top students, those who take the full recommended core of college preparatory courses, declined across the board since Kentucky's reform

Difference Between Kentucky ACT Composite and U.S. Average



began. Drops varied from a low of -0.2 for Science Reasoning to a more disturbing -0.6 for English and Reading.

On the other hand, ACT scores vary widely for kids who didn't take the full core course load but still decided to try for college. For these children, Math is up 0.5 points; but, in a big surprise for a highly writing-oriented reform, English scores for this group dropped 0.1 points in seven years. Coupled with the very dramatic English drop for the kids who took full core course loads, serious questions are raised about what Kentucky is really accomplishing.

{Data Source: ACT Assessment 1997 Results, Summary Report, Kentucky, & KY School Boards Association Advocate, Oct 1995}

WHAT ABOUT TRANSITION TO ADULT LIFE?

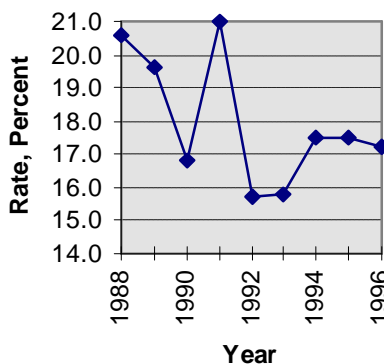
According to the Department of Education, Kentucky high school graduates have enjoyed an enviable ability to go out and get a job, get into college, join the military, etc. The 1997 figure of success was over 95%. However,

the federal Department of Labor continues to throw a wet towel over all of this. Federal youth unemployment data for 1996, shown below, indicates Kentucky youth have been unemployed at rates above 17% for three straight years. This should equate to a total Non-Cognitive Index figure only in the 85% range or so. Clearly, the federal data and the state data don't make sense at this point, and more research is required. {Data Sources: KY Dept. of Ed. and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics}

HOW ABOUT GETTING IN THE MILITARY?

Despite those rosy "Transition" figures, Kentucky kids certainly are not doing well compared to kids from Kentucky's neighboring states when it comes to going to work for Uncle

Kentucky Youth Unemployment Rate



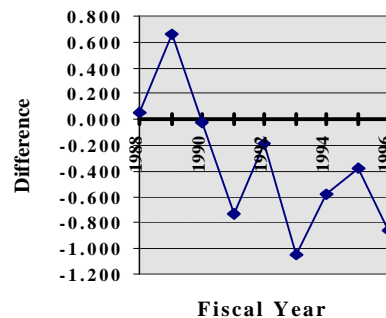
Sam.

The latest available data shows that Kentucky's recruitment rate has consistently remained below the region's average since KERA began. Before KERA, Kentucky supplied above average numbers of residents to the military. Taken together with the unemployment data, it appears young Kentuckians are now less employable. {Data Source: Dept. of Defense}

DOESN'T THE MILITARY DO TESTING?

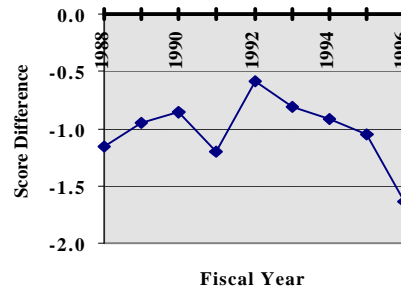
The armed forces do test applicants, and this data is also available annually. Here, the picture for Kentucky kids, like the case of the ACT, isn't good. As shown below, Kentucky's AFQT scores

Difference Between Kentucky's Recruitment Rate and the Regional Average



have fallen steadily since 1992 compared to the regional average score. Keep in mind that this is a true employment test. So far, private employers in Kentucky have not shared results of their tests. However, newspaper articles indicate employers are having trouble finding qualified applicants, at least in the "Golden Triangle" area of the state

Difference Between Kentucky's AFQT Scores and Regional Average



in Northern Kentucky. That seems to disagree with the KIRIS "Transition" scores, too. {Data Source: Dept. of Defense}

FOR "BOTTOM LINERS — HERE IS WHAT THIS COSTS

Say what you will about the various parts of KERA, one thing is certain — it is expensive! A recent study by Dr. Lawrence O. Picus indicated Kentucky's total "opportunity costs" for this test run over \$120 million per year. The cost per student was an astronomical \$848 per year! And, that was the low estimate. Dr. Picus' high estimate was over twice as large, \$1792! For reference, testing with

nationally-normed standardized achievement tests runs about \$5 per student.

Overall, the Kentucky education bill rose from \$2 billion to \$3 billion in just 5 years. {Data Source: *KY Office of Education Accountability*}

ENROLLMENT IN KENTUCKY REMEDIAL AND TUTORIAL PROGRAMS

The past year brought further indications that the graduates of Kentucky's Ungraded Primary (a multi-age implementation of former grades K through 3) could be arriving in 4th Grade with inadequate skills. Following a trend that began in 1993-94, one of two Kentucky 4th Graders needed remedial/tutorial help in Kentucky's Extended School Services program during 1996-97! The products of Ungraded Primary must be questioned when they need so much remediation in the year after they leave this very controversial program.

The graph below gives a quick idea about where the help from this program was directed, and redirected, during recent years. {Data Source: *KY Dept. of Ed.*}

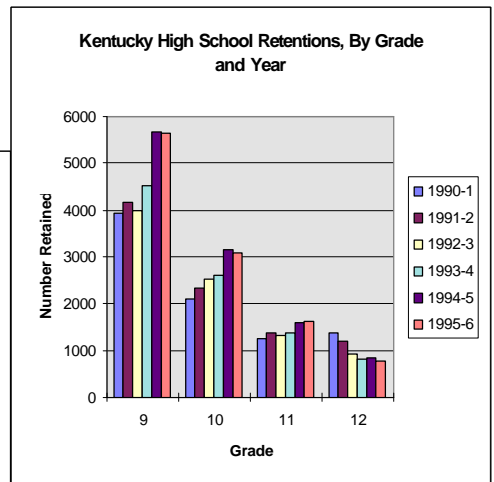
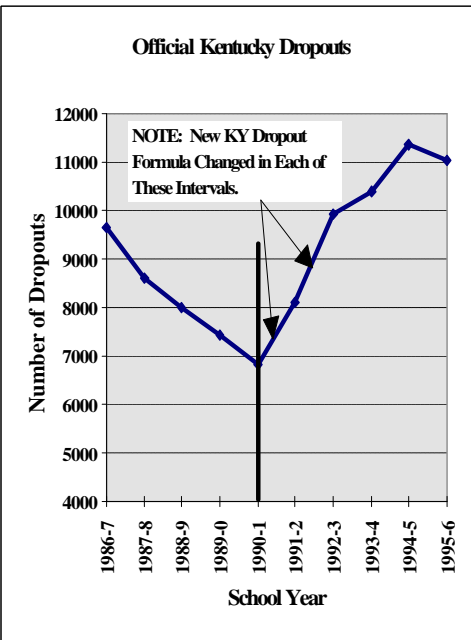
KENTUCKY DROPOUTS One of the most important "non-cognitive" indicators of school performance is the dropout situation. Unfortunately, the Kentucky Department of Education has changed the dropout formula not once, but

twice, since KERA was enacted. This destroyed the possibility of making easy comparisons to the pre-KERA period. Still, it is obvious that the Kentucky dropout picture was improving before KERA began in 1990. Claims of success for KERA must be carefully weighed when this type of hard data is examined. {Data Source: *KY Dept. of Ed.*}

KENTUCKY RETENTIONS

Another declining situation in 1995-96 was the number of high school children retained in grade (those not promoted or graduated). The graph below shows the very rapid increase in retention in 9th Grade is quite dramatic. In fact this is the

highest 9th Grade retention in more than a decade. Retention in all other grades is also running at or near a high since the reform act was passed in 1990. One added note: The retention and dropout graphs on this page stop at the 1995-96 school year because the KY Department of Education now delays reporting these for a year. The delay allows KDE to report KIRIS scores earlier, but it is obvious the change from current



year to prior year reporting did nothing to help KIRIS comparability from year to year.

Kentucky Extended School Services (Tutorial/Remedial Program) Enrollment by Year and Grade

