

# KERA UPDATE

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## First Comments On The Prichard Committee's *Gaining Ground*

The inevitable "how goes it" reports are cropping up as the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) completes its first decade of operation. The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence's contribution: *Gaining Ground, Hard Work and High Hopes for Kentucky Schools*, came out in November. In addition to the 46 page main report, there is an even larger appendix. It will take time to evaluate everything, but the very first table, on page 4 in Prichard's "Introduction and Executive Summary," merits this *KERA Update* all by itself.

Prichard's table shows the "Education Levels of Kentuckians 25 and Older" for 1980, 1990, and 1998. The identified data source is the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), but it looks like the data actually comes from the US Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey* (CPS).

In any event, the high school diploma data from Prichard's report is in Table 1 at the bottom of the page. At first look, one might interpret this as a fine example of how Kentucky's education reform improved the state's overall educational level in the 1990's. But, let's take a moment to think about that. This data only covers people who were at least 25 years old in the listed years. Specifically, in 1998 the youngest persons included were

already 18 back in 1991. Now, KERA was enacted in 1990, but classroom level impacts probably didn't start until the 1991-92 school year when KIRIS testing began. So, virtually all the citizens included in Table 1 had graduated **BEFORE** the reform could have had any possible impact on them. In other words, essentially **EVERY ONE** of the people considered in this table was a totally pre-KERA student.

Now, look at Table 1 again. Between 1980 and 1998, Kentucky's present ADULT population made some pretty impressive gains in education. During the 1980's, the state's percentage of diploma holders went up from 53.1 percent to 64.4 percent. That is an average increase of better than 1 point per year. By 1998, the percentage had increased farther to 77.9 percent for an even bigger rate of increase than earlier. **BUT, THIS ALL INVOLVED PRE-KERA STUDENTS!**

When KERA was being pushed back in the late 1980's, folks said the schools then were weak. In reality, the Prichard report's data clearly shows that Kentucky's schools started doing better in the 1980's, on their own, **before** KERA came along!

By the way, I also found something else of interest. In 1998, Census data shows that 84.8 percent of Kentucky's 18 to 24 year old population had a diploma (which could be a GED, by the way). That wasn't bad performance for these early KERA grads. But, a virtually identical 84.2 percent of the 25 to 44 year olds in Kentucky also had a diploma! Wow! **OUR PRE-KERA**

### **SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS MATCHED KERA'S FINEST WITH NO HELP FROM OUR HIGHLY EXPENSIVE REFORM!**

This sheds important new light on the old contention that Kentucky public education was the worst in the nation back when

**Table 2. Kentuckians with Diplomas**

Age	% With Diploma
18 to 24	84.8
25 to 44	84.2

KERA was enacted. That claim was simply based on badly out of date data for people who had hadn't been inside a Kentucky school in years.

We cannot afford more data interpretation mistakes like that. We need to know what is happening with KERA today. We don't need inaccurate comparisons using pre-KERA students from 10 years ago. And, despite some pitches being made today, the current picture isn't pretty. Right now, the short list shows Kentucky has alarming remediation rates both in public schools and for our four year college freshmen. The number of students tagged with learning disabilities has skyrocketed. Our dropout ranking among the states plummeted 10 places in this decade. Our scores on the SAT and ACT are not keeping pace with the rest of the nation. And, our college-bound students are deserting public schools. Pardon me, but, that isn't "gaining ground."

**Table 1. Education Levels of Kentuckians 25 and Over Adults with a Diploma**

	1980	1990	1998
<b>Percent</b>	53.1%	64.4%	77.9%
<b>KY Rank Among States</b>	50	50	47