

KERA UPDATE

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#41

Graduations? Kentucky, We Have A Problem!

Kentucky's graduation and dropout situation is getting very serious. Kentucky has reversed a strong trend of improvement from the mid 1980s to 1993 and now has dropped back below the national average. Worse, while the rest of the nation shows some signs of reducing this problem, Kentucky's latest trend appears to be on an unaltered decline.

Before you look at the graph, consider when KERA began to impact our classrooms. I believe the start of KIRIS testing in 1991-92 fairly marks this point. That's because KIRIS was designed and used as the central mechanism to drive the reform into our classrooms. Especially in the early years, KIRIS, by design, offered a considerable portion of the rather limited information teachers received about what KDE really intended our schools to teach. Also, even in those classrooms where teachers initially resisted reforms, KIRIS testing disrupted more than a week of academic instruction. That was a statewide impact no teacher could avoid. Thus, the start of KIRIS certainly seems to fairly mark the beginning of widespread classroom effects from KERA. Now, check out the graph.

I plotted Kentucky's graduation rates, which are the percentage of each 9th grade class that graduates four years later. I used actual graduation figures and membership data from the Kentucky Department of Education. I also plotted the U.S. average graduation rates as reported by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence in their 10 year report on KERA. I have not been able to verify Prichard's U.S. data, but I was able to verify that Kentucky data published in Prichard's report had significant errors for the last two years on the graph. I plotted those erroneous points for reference

because Prichard incorrectly briefed many key people in Kentucky that our graduation rate was performing better than the U.S. average. Clearly, that isn't correct.

Notice that the U.S. graduation rate fell fairly consistently throughout the entire period. Kentucky's graduation rate, however, improved nicely up to 1992-93, one year after KIRIS testing began. Unfortunately, Kentucky's graduation performance turned very sharply after 1992-93. We began declining at a rate even faster than the U.S. trend. By 1997-98 Kentucky fell back below the U.S. average.

Also, note that the U.S. trend started to shallow out a bit after 1994-95. In contrast, Kentucky's recent trend is not flattening out. That indicates our future graduation performance compared to the rest of the nation may become even worse.

Now notice that Prichard's incorrect data implies Kentucky recently halted its declining graduation rate and is doing notably better than the national average. That is generally what Prichard claimed, but this is absolutely incorrect.

So, Kentucky faces a graduation rate and related dropout situation of considerable urgency. Legislation is pending to address this problem, but it is important for everyone to understand that Kentucky's dropouts and the related graduation rates are a major, growing problem. Our rates are deteriorating, and at a pace even faster than the U.S. average.

We need to figure out why KERA is working so poorly for our dropouts and get it fixed, quickly. And, due to the worsening situation, it is clear that weak, half-hearted attempts won't do. It is going

