

KERA UPDATE

July 2000

About The Kentucky Education Reform Act

#48

You Must Have A Medical Epidemic Before You Cancel School Is This the Right Message to Send to Kentucky Parents and Schools?

One of the more compelling petitions in some time is on the Kentucky Board of Education's August agenda. Floyd County School District is asking for relief from state attendance funding rules. Floyd's tragic story provides rather disturbing glimpses into the thought processes at the Kentucky Department of Education.

Setting the Stage

This incredible situation started in late July, 1999. Floyd County's petition shows that on the 29th, a middle school student played basketball at the home of a student from Betsy Lane Elementary School. Betsy Lane is part of the Floyd County system.

Five days later, on August 4th, this middle schooler began vomiting. Within a day, he was dead. The cause of death was bacterial meningitis.

About five weeks later, the Betsy Lane student became ill. In the next four months, this Betsy Lane student experienced a medical hell that included 35 days of coma, amputation of a leg and 5 fingers, removal of 60% of her intestines, surgical removal of other extensive areas of tissue, and loss of all hearing in one ear with 70% loss in the other ear. The cause of this pain and suffering — bacterial meningitis.

Meningitis is a scary proposition. It inflames membranes of the brain, and the experience of the two students from the Floyd area are entirely typical of the potential outcomes. And, because meningitis can be spread by sneezing, coughing or direct contact with infected individuals, there certainly could be cause

for concern about any assemblies of people when the disease might well be present.

The Triggering Event

As a result of the two dramatic examples of meningitis in the Betsy Lane area, all of this information was apparently well known to parents at the school by Spring, 2000.

So, when a third student contracted meningitis in late May, 2000, parent reaction was almost inevitable. They pulled more than 600 of Betsy Lane's 800 students out of school on June 1st, providing a clear demonstration of serious concern.

Reacting to this series of events and a disease incubation period that runs over a week, the Floyd County Board of Education cancelled classes for the few days left in the school year.

The Tragic Costs Mount

The school cancellation was not without significant consequences, however. Because of the dropped days, Betsy Lane did not meet Kentucky's minimum school day requirement. Without relief, those days become days of zero attendance in the school funding formula. Betsy Lane stood to lose a considerable amount of funding (estimated at \$150,000 to \$168,000).

Under these rather extraordinary circumstances, it seemed reasonable to Floyd County Schools to ask for relief. After all, they didn't cause the cases of meningitis or the resulting strong parental reaction. Floyd petitioned the Kentucky Commissioner of Education on June 2nd.

Frankfort Sends Its Message

On June 9th, the Kentucky Commissioner of Education responded to Floyd's petition by flatly denying the request. He indicated his interpretation of the laws of the Commonwealth did not allow him authority to provide relief. But, conspicuously absent was any offer from the Commissioner to help bring this issue forward to other agencies that might have such authority. And, adding insult to injury, the Commissioner closed by advising that the district would indeed suffer a hit in their average daily attendance computation.

Floyd decided to appeal the Commissioner's decision to the Kentucky Board of Education. The Board will consider the issue in early August. Sadly, the Commissioner of Education already recommended that the Board should deny Floyd's request. That harsh recommendation eliminates any doubts about where his feelings lie. Hopefully, the Board will display more compassion and judgment than has been demonstrated to date.

Certainly, some very bad messages are being sent by the current state of affairs. One also wonders if Floyd's school cancellation prevented more meningitis cases. We'll never know, but Floyd's actions might deserve praise rather than financial penalty.

In any event, Kentucky parents just got a stunning example of where priorities lie in Frankfort's education bureaucracy: Forget potential threats to your children; you sent them to school! If you don't, the school will suffer!