

KERA UPDATE

October 2000

About The Kentucky Education Reform Act

#49

KENTUCKY'S DROPOUT RATE IS DOWN

When the year 2000 CATS results were released in late September, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) also released non-academic data for the state's public schools. One piece of apparently good news was a 0.37 point decrease in the state's dropout rate. This is a fairly large one year change although the resulting 4.97 rate still means the state is losing far too many students before graduation. But, is the news really as good as KDE's figures imply?

PROBLEM 1 — KDE CHANGED THE DROPOUT RATE FORMULA AGAIN

KDE was very forthright in admitting they had once again changed the way they calculate the dropout rate. That marks three times this formula has changed since KERA was enacted. The reason for the change makes sense, to align our calculation with a national standard. But, KDE's "cold turkey" adoption of the new rate was not necessary. KDE should have continued to use both the old and new calculations for a couple of years. We should have avoided this suddenly severed

trend line. As things stand, just as current CATS academic scores don't relate to previous KIRIS results (or to a new CATS that starts in the Spring of 2001), Kentucky severed its absolutely critical dropout trend line at a very serious time.

PROBLEM 2 — THE GRADUATION RATE IS FALLING

While the new dropout rate is lower, another closely related statistic deteriorated again. The state's high school graduation rate fell another full point, placing us noticeably below the projected national rate for the first time since KIRIS testing began in 1992 (See the lower left graph).

How can this be? If the students didn't graduate, but they also didn't drop out of school, where did they go?

The answer can be found in another statistic — the retention rate. This shows the number of students who don't get promoted to the next grade at the end of the school year. Kentucky's high school

retention rate shot up significantly last year, primarily in 9th grade. Presently, our 12.55 retention rate for 9th grade is the highest ever since the earliest data I have (See the second graph)! When you look at this, keep in mind the experts say 9th grade is a real holding tank for eventual dropouts.

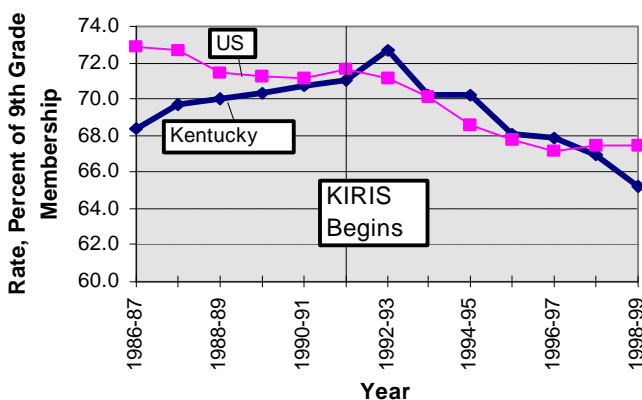
What all of this means is that while it appears we have not lost these students, at least for now, we also have not been able to help them progress past the critical high school entry grade, either. The kids are still here, but the situation is very tenuous.

BOTTOM LINE

This situation is a mounting burden for our high schools. While our colleges complain about increased numbers of poorly prepared Freshmen, our high schools must focus instead on mushrooming numbers of underperforming 9th graders.

Why are *so many* 9th graders now in trouble? Most of these kids have spent virtually their entire school careers under

Kentucky and U.S. Graduation Rates



Kentucky 9th Grade Retention Rate

