

KERA UPDATE

April 2003

About The Kentucky Education Reform Act

#67

Teacher Salaries — More of That ‘KERA Math’!!!

During the recently concluded Kentucky legislative session, public school teachers around the state raised a considerable ruckus over their pay. I think they have a point, but they are not targeting the issue properly.

According to the Southern Regional Education Board’s *Focus on Teacher Salaries in the SREB States*, January 2003, teacher salaries in Kentucky only increased 22.6 percent from 1991-92 to 2001-02.

However, when the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 was passed, it included major funding increases. According to the latest available *Annual Report* from the Kentucky Office of Education Accountability, funding from all sources went up dramatically over the following 11 years, over 91 percent.

Now, I was educated before the days of KERA and fuzzy math, but here is how I ‘cipher’ this out. Total funding increased by more than 91 percent over almost the same period cited by the SREB. That money obviously went somewhere in the state’s education coffers. But, how can that be? How could Kentucky’s per pupil funding go up a princely 91.6 percent while teachers got less than a fourth of that in increased salaries? Teachers clearly got far from an equitable share.

The answer, of course, is that the lion’s share of the BIG money went to the bureaucracy. That includes the state’s extremely expensive programs for assessment and accountability. It also includes state-level programs that pushed radical education philosophies down teachers’ throats. Many of these programs (Whole Language Reading and Fuzzy Math) ran on despite scant evidence of effectiveness.

Most of these radical education programs are centrally directed by Frankfort. More come from another bureaucratic creation called Regional Service Centers. The money spent generally never reaches to school districts, let alone the classroom.

However, school districts also added a lot of expensive bureaucratic layers in the decade of KERA. The education reform created a host of new requirements that led to expensive new district positions like assessment coordinators, school safety experts, instructional specialists, etc., etc. As a result, it is no surprise that data in the American Legislative Exchange Council’s latest education report indicates Kentucky’s teacher to total staff ratio ranks as second worst in the nation. Less than half the education people in Kentucky are teachers! Clearly, funding for staff is lavish.

Meanwhile, in some school districts, and certainly at the classroom level, taxpayer largess is far less evident. Not only did teacher salaries advance much more slowly than overall education spending, but some Kentucky districts in wealthy parts of the state now face a funding crisis. It’s more of that ‘KERA math’ which says that wealthy districts must pay more of their operating expenses from local real estate taxes. At the same time, poor districts get a bonanza from state income taxes, taxes disproportionately paid by residents in wealthy districts. It’s like a double graduated income tax.

Parents know there is a prob-

lem. As discussed in *KERA Update 66*, parents are pulling their kids out of Kentucky’s public schools at a nation-leading rate. That farther erodes support for the public school tax base, of course, making the situation more critical.

But, back to the teachers’ problem. The problem isn’t a shortage of money, and teachers need to understand that. The issue is spending money on expensive and unproductive overhead that doesn’t really help teachers, and doesn’t improve education. But, until someone with gumption faces down the education bureaucracy, teachers will remain left behind. You see, after already footing bills for nearly a 100% increase in education, taxpayers are beginning to say: “Enough!”

Kentucky Per Pupil Funding Sources ‘Decade’ Changes, Statewide Averages

Funding Source	1989-90 Year	1999-00 Year	Percent Change
Total Revenue Per Pupil	\$3,547	\$6797	91.6%

Data Source: Kentucky Office of Education Accountability, *Annual Report, Oct 2001*, Pg. 236. Figures may not add due to rounding.

Ratio of Teachers to Total School Staff, Kentucky and US Averages, 1998

	Total Staff	Teachers	Percent Teachers
US	5,416,699	2,826,146	52.17%
KY	91,088	40,803	44.80

Data Source: *Report Card on American Education, A State by State Analysis, 1976—2001*, American Legislative Exchange Council, Oct 2002, Washington DC, Table 1.9.