

46. Associated Press

05-14 2:00a

Dropout rate continues to rise despite reforms

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) - State education officials are researching why, despite passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act and other steps, Kentucky's dropout rate continues to rise.

Kentucky's rate for grades nine through 12 has increased from 5.06 percent for the 1992-93 school year to 5.43 percent for 1994-95. While slight, that accounted for an increase of 1,379 dropouts. Some high schools have double-digit rates.

State education officials plan to report back to lawmakers and the state Board of Education in June.

Officials are looking at schools with low and high dropout rates in an effort to find out the reasons.

But Kentucky officials suggest several explanations for the trend, including easy availability of entry-level jobs for dropouts and tougher graduation standards at some schools.

At South Laurel High School, where the dropout rate was 10 percent for the 1994-95 school year, Principal Roger Marcum blames the tougher graduation requirements the school district adopted and parents' willingness to let children drop out.

"We beg; we plead ... they still make that decision to drop out," Marcum said. "Most of those kids are concerned that all they need is enough money to make their car payment."

Though teen pregnancy has decreased statewide, it is still a concern for educators and is considered a factor in causing girls to drop out.

Some educators think that the impact of the 1990 statewide school reform hasn't been felt and that older students now dropping out haven't had the full

benefit of KERA.

Marty Duckenfield, a spokeswoman for the National Dropout Prevention Center based at Clemson University in South Carolina, noted that many of Kentucky's school reforms were aimed at the youngest students and that it may simply be a matter of time before those efforts show up in lower dropout rates.

Still, others think the dropout issue has been placed on the back burner because so many other education issues are in the spotlight. "We have not paid enough attention to it," said Robert Sexton of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence.

In 1980, of all the states, Kentucky had the largest percentage of adults 25 or older with no high school diploma: 47 percent.

Kentucky was 49th in 1990, when one-third of its adult population had no high school diploma. That statistic, and others like it, helped spur calls for school reform.

The Kentucky Education Reform Act included two initiatives intended to help prevent dropouts. The Extended School Services program provides tutoring and extra help to students having problems in class. And family resource and youth services centers at some schools help provide social services and other assistance.

There also are dozens of dropout-prevention programs sponsored by the state and local districts.

But those efforts don't catch everyone, and educators can't make older students stay in school. State law allows 16- and 17-year-olds to drop out with their parents' permission; anyone 18 or older

can drop out no matter what parents say.

Meanwhile, students don't always think of their futures.

"Most of these decisions (to drop out) were made when they were in the sixth, seventh or eighth grade," said Ronnie Doyle, associate superintendent in Barren County, which had a dropout rate about half that of the state as a whole.

Schools are held accountable for dropouts by the state. The number of dropouts is included among other indicators such as attendance that can lower a school's overall standing.

But low test scores by poor students also hurt schools.

Ed Reidy, a deputy education commissioner who oversees the testing system, acknowledged that could be an incentive to allow students to drop out but said he didn't believe it was a significant problem.

Nevertheless, Education Commissioner Bill Cody said he's considering a proposal that would prohibit schools that qualify for cash rewards from getting the money if their dropout rate has increased. Schools that maintain a low rate in general would not be penalized, Cody said.

Shaune McKenzie, 27, enrolled in Jefferson County High School, an alternative school, after dropping out of Jeffersonton High. She worked for awhile for a cleaning service and as a waitress and has this message for any teen-ager thinking about dropping out:

"Please don't make the same mistake I did. It's not easy getting a job," she said. "The \$4.25 an hour (minimum wage) doesn't get you very far in this life." ■

47. Tampa Tribune

May 14, 1997

Lottery scholarships popular bet

By ROB CHEPAK
of The Tampa Tribune

TALLAHASSEE - Thousands of high school students have a chance to win the Florida Lottery even though most of them aren't old enough to play the games.

Their opportunity is the Florida Bright

Futures Scholarship program, which was created by the Legislature this year and funded with \$75 million out of lottery ticket sales.

The Florida Department of Education has set a July 1 deadline for applying for the scholarships that cover 75 percent to

100 percent of the annual cost of tuition and fees at a university in Florida.

So far, the scholarships have been wildly popular. About 42,000 students have applied. Students must have at least a 3.0, or B, grade point average when they graduate and a 970 on the Scholastic

Assessment Test.

Anyone who qualifies is guaranteed a scholarship, said Liz Sweeney, who directs financial assistance programs for the education department.

Students should get the money before the fall semester begins, but there's some concern it could take longer. Nonetheless, "This is a great first step," said Education Commissioner Frank Brogan.

The program has been in the works for a while. Lawmakers drafted the framework for a similar program two years ago, but didn't fund it in the budget. A fully funded program was a top priority for Gov. Lawton Chiles and the Republican-led Legislature this year. Under the program, lottery money actually covers three scholarships:

— **Florida Merit Scholars:** This is for students who graduate with a B average and minimum score of 970 on the SAT. They can receive 75 percent of tuition and fees at a state university. Average tuition and fees is about \$1,900.

— **Florida Academic Scholars:** Students must have a GPA of at least 3.5 in a college preparatory curriculum and a minimum 1270 SAT score. Winners receive scholarships for tuition and fees, and \$600 for books.

— **Florida Gold Seal Vocational Scholarships:** Qualified students must have a B average in all of their subjects required for graduation, a 3.5 GPA in

vocational courses, a passing score on the Florida College Placement Test and have completed a two-year vocational or technical education program. Scholarships cover 75 percent of tuition and fees.

The education department originally set the application deadline for April 1, but pushed it back because so many people were interested. Already, the number of applications, 20,000, is more than the state's two other merit-based scholarships combined.

The agency has been swamped with telephone calls about the scholarships, too.

"We haven't stopped to count the calls, but basically, especially last week, every time we hung up the phone, the phone rang again," Sweeney said. She said the 3.0 GPA and a 970 SAT score cutoff "hits a lot of students that didn't qualify for the others."

Lottery scholarships are good at public or private universities and vocational or community colleges in Florida. The scholarships are renewable for four years if the students maintain good grades.

Lawmakers set aside \$75 million to cover 42,000 students. If that's not enough, the state will reduce the awards. Education officials don't expect that to happen.

Lawmakers faced considerable pressure to change the way the lottery

finances education.

Voters created the lottery in 1986 to pay for classroom extras the state's general education budget didn't cover. Instead, a shell game developed, as the Legislature gradually slashed education's share of revenue from 61 percent to about 50 percent - about \$1.5 billion a year - so it could spend more on other things, such as prison construction.

Today, 38 cents out of every \$1 ticket goes to education. The rest pays prize winners and operating expenses. The games generated \$829 million for education in 1995. About 57 percent went to Florida's 67 school districts, which may spend it as they please.

But this year alone, classroom overcrowding and shortages in supplies have been major problems. Many people blamed the lottery, saying the problems wouldn't have happened if the games lived up to their original promise.

While lawmakers say it's not fair to scapegoat the lottery, it still has a public relations problem. Now, the lottery scholarships peddle hope to the public, hope that the games can make a difference for Florida's 2.3 million public school children.

"We believe in academic excellence, and we can reward academic excellence," said state Rep. Cynthia Chestnut, a Gainesville Democrat. "I think this is very tangible evidence of the use of lottery funds, which is important." ■

48. Associated Press

05-14 2:13a Nebraskaland Feature

Sixty-nine-year-old Kearney man graduates from UNK

By BILL O'NEILL
Kearney Hub

KEARNEY, Neb. (AP) - Seeing his family face the Depression taught Elmer Vogel the value of hard work and the ability to focus.

Some 60 years later, with one research paper's worth of 14 books strewn on a table in his two-room apartment, Vogel said he used those traits as a University of Nebraska at Kearney student.

"It's a permanent thing," Vogel says of his 'Dirty 30s' experiences, which included the county sheriff telling Vogel's parents to move from their home because of a missed payment. "Not harmful, but just simply that it taught me the discipline of hard work. It was determination to keep our home.

"When you focus on one thing, I

learned, you learn to use that same type of focus on the next thing you do. I used that method of focusing when I came to college. It wasn't easy."

Last week, the 69-year-old Vogel sat in the UNK Health and Sports Center with more than 600 other graduating students.

Four years ago, Vogel said he was skeptical that he could sit through a university class.

"I left home on a Monday morning, and told my wife (Doris), 'I probably won't be able to sit down in the seats they use, because I'm pretty big, and I may not be comfortable. I'll be back tonight,'" Vogel said.

Soon, school began to intrigue Vogel, who earned his general education diploma just before beginning college. A

rural Stuart native, Vogel graduated from the eighth grade at age 12, then went to work on the family farm.

"It wasn't done in that neighborhood right then," Vogel said of continuing into high school. "We were a German community. We were rubbing dirt out of our eyes yet, from the dust storms of the 1930s."

Vogel, though, became a successful entrepreneur in the Stuart area. By the time he was 40, he had completed a 15-year experiment on 400 cattle that led to the development of the Nebraska Beef Improvement Association. He owned a fertilizer plant, some farms and ranches, grain and construction businesses, and was the fixed base operator at the airport in O'Neill. He and his wife also have been lifelong experimental gardeners.

KENTUCKY'S CLASS ACT

How a court order produced real school reform

It's early afternoon at Ross Point Elementary School, just off Kingdom Come Highway in the Appalachian coal country of Harlan County, Ky. Eight-year-old Meredith McCue sits cross-legged in a reading loft, mesmerized by *Moby Dick*. Next to a window, Aaron Huckleby aims a telescope at a ridge above the school, while nearby a classmate studies insect larvae under a microscope.

There are no rows of little chairs or rigid drills at Ross Point, and descriptive assessments have replaced letter grades. The children, who elsewhere would be assigned to grades one through three, here share the same classroom. Older pupils help younger ones, and everyone learns at their own pace. Veteran teacher Flora Shell likes the arrangement. "All the flowers don't bloom at the same time," she says.

ANALYTICAL THINKING. These 21 students, like youngsters across the state, are key players in what may be the most important laboratory for public education in the nation. In six years, impelled by a court order and spurred by big business, Kentucky has transformed its schools, turning a bargain-basement embarrassment into an increasingly effective system. It has upended curriculums, putting new emphasis on writing and analytical thinking. Rich and poor districts get the same financing, and everyone is measured against strict performance goals. "It's the [most thorough] and most coherently designed reform in the country," says Michael Timpane, vice-president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in Princeton, N.J.

Now, at the end of the first phase of Kentucky's reforms, results are coming forth. They are compelling, if not uniformly stellar: Test scores of elementary school pupils have improved sharply, though older students are gaining at a much slower rate. Once lumped

with education losers such as Louisiana and Mississippi, Kentucky now ranks in the middle of the pack, "among a group of states we've never been with," says Robert R. Sexton, director of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, a Lexington civic group that spearheaded the reforms.

Kentucky is providing critical intelligence as the nation sorts through a hodgepodge of largely unproven local strategies to shore up education. Most states are testing some form of charter schools, which free administrators and teachers from most local regulations. Some towns, such as Chelsea, Mass., have contracted out their systems to independent operators (page 94). Virginia is putting together writing stan-

dards for fourth and fifth graders, while Prince Georges County, Md., employs special tutors and Saturday classes to help minorities perform better in math.

All the efforts are driven by intensified public awareness, amplified by President Clinton and other politicians, of

America's educational shortcomings. Test results released last autumn showed that in math and science, U.S. students rank below those even in Bulgaria. Although national scores were up modestly in the last decade, many educators and corporate leaders worry that an eroding skill base could retard U.S. economic growth and competitiveness.

Such concerns helped fuel Kentucky's transformation. More important, though, the Kentucky Education Reform Act, or KERA, was born of a 1985 lawsuit brought by 66 poor school districts

against the state over funding inequities. The action touched a nerve, inspiring state business leaders, news media, and civic groups to press for broader changes. "This was the last golden opportunity to get Kentucky out of its agrarian past," says Jack Moreland, now the president of Northern Kentucky University, who then was superintendent of schools in Dayton, Ky.

The State Supreme Court found for the plaintiffs in 1989, and ordered equity in funding—which the state achieved as it lifted overall school spending 60% by last year. Unexpectedly, though, it also declared the state's entire educational system unconstitutional. The court demanded that legislators come up with a plan for a top-to-bottom remake within nine months.

The result, KERA, borrowed liberally from strategies being tested elsewhere: It has employed Vermont's scheme, for example, requiring fourth graders through seniors to keep yearlong portfolios of their work; merged grades, too, had been tried elsewhere. But Kentucky was the only state to "put all of the pieces together," says Dr. Helen F. Ladd at Duke University's Sanford Institute of Public Policy.

And in many areas, it broke new ground. To improve accountability, Kentucky handed over local hiring and budgeting authority to newly elected councils of parents and teachers, who in turn select principals. Nepotism among school board officials, common especially in the state's isolated moun-

tain counties, was outlawed.

Most important, each of the state's 1,300 schools was given a benchmark grade, based on tests of fourth, eighth, and 11th graders, and ordered to improve its rating each year until 2012.

If a school improves, its teachers can earn bonuses of up to \$2,300 each—and so far, teachers in 53% of schools have done so. If scores decline, the bonuses end, and an independent expert can be sent in to push remedies. "This test is supposed to drive pretty much everything," says David R. Johnson, schools superintendent for the city of Harlan. Harlan High School's scores fell in 1994 but have come back up since.

Kentucky's business community has helped shape much of the change. Tired of retraining new hires and worried about losing employers to states with stronger labor pools, 50 companies led by Ashland, Humana, and United Parcel Service backed the reform movement with money and lobbying. Since then, they've had a hand in curriculum reform, too, pressing for courses that teach practical, job-oriented skills.

The payoff is distant. "This was to be a 10-year-long effort," says David A. Jones, Humana's chairman. "We know that changes of this magnitude require

More...

Remedial education brings no improvement, study says

By Carol Innerst
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The federal government's \$7.2-billion-a-year remedial education program for disadvantaged children hasn't worked, concludes a new study of some 27,000 elementary and junior high students who received Chapter I compensatory education.

"Chapter I as it was implemented ... was not a sufficiently strong intervention to close the gap between participants and their more advantaged peers," says a draft summary of the final study authorized by Congress.

"Indeed, it was not strong enough to show a difference between students who were in the program and comparable students who were not," according to the report, which is just now being circulated on Capitol Hill.

The conclusions on the 32-year-old Chapter I program track preliminary findings released in 1993 as Congress prepared to reauthorize the costliest component of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The full report will be delivered to Congress in about 30 days.

"This is the sixth or seventh evaluation in 32 years, and they've

all come to the same conclusion," said Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the Fordham Foundation and an assistant secretary of education in the Reagan administration.

Abt Associates Inc. of Bethesda and Cambridge, Mass., conducted the latest study for the Department of Education, tracking 27,000 first-, third- and seventh-graders from 1991 until 1994.

"Every time the thing is reauthorized, Congress summons up an evaluation, so we have six or seven — one every five years," Mr. Finn said. "Some don't come to any conclusion because it's too embarrassing to tell the truth."

Noting the cumulative spending on Chapter I since its inception totals nearly \$100 billion, Mr. Finn said, "It's the biggest pork-barrel project in American education. Almost everybody's district gets Chapter I money."

Rep. William F. Goodling, the Pennsylvania Republican who heads the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, has long argued that the billions spent on the Chapter I program have not produced the desired academic results.

"Initially, it was a 'pull-out' program, which had to fail because the child was missing everything

the classroom teacher was teaching when the child was pulled out," he said. "Also, we've never been very successful using the money for older children in trying to improve their reading skills."

"I don't know how many more studies it will take," said Mr. Goodling, who wants to evaluate what works among hundreds of federal education programs before funding any new Clinton administration education initiatives.

Chapter I in 1994 was revamped and renamed Title I, with the redesign supposed to place less emphasis on the pull-out. But schools have considerable leeway in designing programs.

Title I "doesn't look much like the program the study reported on," said Christopher T. Cross, assistant secretary of education in the Bush administration and now chairman of an independent panel that advises the Department of Education on research.

He still supports Title I and remains hopeful that improvements now being discussed will enable it to benefit disadvantaged pupils.

"I wouldn't want to see it scrapped," said Mr. Cross, who also is president of the Council for Basic Education and the Maryland State Board of Education.

it." One persistent area of weakness: Kentucky's high schoolers. Dropout rates haven't budged, and test scores aren't close to meeting goals. National college admissions test scores remain flat. In part, that's because the first crop of reform-era primary school graduates are just now entering 10th grade. Still, "no matter how good the students coming into the high schools are, the high schools need improvement," admits Wilmer S. Cody, commissioner of the Kentucky Education Dept.

"ELITIST." Predictably, other elements of KERA have drawn attack. Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change in Minneapolis, says the state's "elitist and top-down" strategy doesn't let local districts pursue alternatives such as charter schools that could spur more substantive improvement. Some parents, meanwhile, complain that the state's labyrinthine testing consumes far too much of their children's time. Others are dubious of the consolidated primary grades. In Ross Point, Tim Stevens worries that his son, Timothy, an 8-year-old at Ross Point Elementary, may not get the attention he needs in reading.

Even as they express concern, though, most Kentuckians acknowledge that their bold experiment is, at least,

far better than the alternative. "I left high school in 1982, and I couldn't read," admits Stevens, a gravel-truck driver. Now, adult literacy rates are up, a trickle-down effect, officials say, of the heightened educational environment. Statewide, high school completion rates are improving. And in 1996 National Assessment of Education Progress tests for math, Kentucky eighth graders scored an average of 10% higher than in 1990; fourth graders

were up 4%. Strikingly, poor districts now perform as well on most tests as wealthier ones.

Does Kentucky provide a viable model for schools elsewhere? Susan Traiman, director of the education initiative for Business Roundtable, says "there are some who feel the Kentucky story is too unique to be transferable, because it was launched by a court case and swept out the old system."

But that may be its very strength:

Improving America's schools may demand radical surgery rather than piecemeal experimentation. By dumping an inadequate system and starting from scratch, by investing more and tying funding to performance, Kentucky has boosted its children's academic prospects. Arguably, that has lifted its economic prospects as well. Those are important lessons from an unlikely place.

*By Peter Galuszka
in Harlan County, Ky.*

Revolution in the Classroom

RADICAL STEPS...

CURRICULUM OVERHAUL Most dramatically, the state merged the first three grades, putting all children aged 6 to 8 in the same classroom and letting them learn at their own pace.

SHARED OVERSIGHT Districts were required to create parent-teacher councils with power to select principals and, ultimately, to run schools. Business also played a role, contributing to curriculum development.

ACCOUNTABILITY Annual testing measures school performance. The average of scores over two-year periods determines school progress and also teacher bonuses. Faltering schools get remedial help.

FUNDING EQUITY The school budget statewide has been expanded by 60%. In the process, students in inner city and rural districts for the first time got as much state money as those in wealthy suburban schools.

...YIELD MIXED RESULTS

GRADE-SCHOOL GOLD On state-created tests, fourth graders consistently have scored far higher than the set targets. Fourth and eighth graders have improved on national math tests.

HIGH SCHOOL SLUMP More kids are graduating, but college admission test scores haven't budged, and results on state tests lag far behind benchmarks. Administrators admit secondary schools need more work.

RICH-POOR PARITY Students in poor districts now score as well on standardized tests as those from richer schools. Experts point to funding equity and uniform deployment of teaching resources.

IMPROVED CLIMATE Reforms have endured political challenges, creating a sense of confidence across the state's education system. One long-term gain: Adult literacy, which once ranked lowest in the nation, is now average.

Clinton Says Consideration of Tax Breaks Could Be Delayed

By Stephen Burd

After President Clinton's re-election in November, his Administration tried to keep its proposed tax breaks for college costs on a fast track.

But now the White House may be hitting the brakes.

The Clinton Administration told Congressional leaders last month that it was willing to postpone discussions about the tax proposals until an agreement is reached on a plan to balance the federal budget. The President's previous position had been that the tax breaks should be part of the overall budget plan.

White House officials said they were still serious about pursuing tax credits and deductions to help students pay for college. They said, however, that the delay may help move the budget talks forward, in light of suggestions by Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich that a balanced-budget deal could be more easily achieved without a contentious debate on tax cuts. "The President is committed to enacting his tax cuts and balancing the budget, and he believes his budget plan shows you can do both," said Gene Sperling, chairman of the National Economic Council, in a statement. "But if having a separate vote on tax cuts turns out to be a means of getting a bipartisan balanced-budget agreement, we're open to that."

Publicly, supporters of Mr. Clinton's tax-break proposals played down the significance of these statements. "In any sort of ongoing budgetary negotiations, there is a lot of gamesmanship and positioning that goes on," said Terry W. Hartle, vice-president for governmental relations at the American Council on Education. "You don't want to read too

much into one day's comments in a year-long budget process. This certainly does not signal a retreat by the President on his tax-cut plans."

But other student-aid experts said the President would have difficulty getting his college tax breaks approved if they are not considered as part of a budget agreement.

According to Thomas R. Wolanin, who was a Congressional aide for 18 years, budget packages are given top priority by lawmakers and tend to proceed much more quickly, and with fewer obstacles, than do individual bills. "The budget bill is the big enchilada that everybody pays attention to," he said. "If you are on that train, that train will move." Mr. Wolanin is a professor of education policy at George Washington University and a senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy, a Washington-based research group.

Other aid experts questioned whether it was realistic to think that lawmakers would pursue tax cuts after they had made all the "difficult choices and political tradeoffs" needed to balance the budget.

In his fiscal-1998 budget plan, the President proposed letting families choose between a \$10,000 tax deduction and a \$1,500 tax credit to help pay for college.

The tax plans have received a lukewarm reception on Capitol Hill. Republican and Democratic lawmakers alike have said the proposals are too expensive, do not focus on the neediest students, and may lead colleges to increase their tuition.

White House officials have complained to the college associations in recent weeks that their critiques of the plan have hurt the proposals' prospects with lawmakers.

Some higher-education groups, including the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the College Board, have argued that the President's tax plans would most help upper-middle-income families, who normally can afford to pay for college without government aid.

According to financial-aid experts, Administration officials have concluded that the President will win more political points by pushing for the passage of a balanced-budget agreement than by holding up an agreement with an insistence on including tax breaks for tuition. The last thing the President wants, the experts say, is for Republicans to be able to portray him as holding a budget agreement "hostage" to his campaign promises.

Said Mr. Wolanin: "It's not like they would be holding the budget agreement up for something that is universally loved."

On the other hand, a delay in considering the tax proposals might actually improve them, says Edward M. Elmendorf, vice-president for governmental relations at the state-college association. In budget bills, he said, "good public-policy decisions" often take a back seat to political considerations. So many programs are included in budget bills, and so much horse-trading goes on, that lawmakers don't have the time to assess the full impact of the changes, he said.

"If anything," Mr. Elmendorf said, "I see a time delay as an opportunity for the Administration and Congress to sit down with members of the higher-education community to address the proposals they have advanced for making important changes to the President's plans."