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AUTHOR Reeves, Cynthia
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ABSTRACT

In response to a state supreme court decision that the state's system of schooling was unconstitutional, the Kentucky legislature passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990. In December, 2000, a Louisville conference brought together educators, policymakers, and researchers to discuss research findings and lessons learned during 10 years of reform. Research findings included: student achievement has improved, socioeconomic status is not a major factor in school improvement, assessment and accountability can be powerful motivators to improve performance, and targeted intervention can be highly effective in improving test scores. Political lessons learned were that the integrity of the legislation could be maintained by building and sustaining a coalition to support the work of reform, and by staying the course. Policy lessons included: reform and funding must go hand in hand; good assessment is important, with continuous assessment needed to measure individual student progress and accountability tests needed to measure school success; testing and high standards must be accompanied by programs that ensure all students have support for achieving at high levels and that assist teachers in developing strategies to help diverse learners reach high levels of achievement; and good communication is essential between reform designers and implementers to give implementers a clear understanding of reform goals and purposes. (TD)

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LESSONS FROM KENTUCKY

Cynthia Reeves

The "All Children Can Learn" conference held in Louisville on December 7-9, 2000, brought together educators, policymakers, and researchers to discuss the lessons learned from ten years of education reform in Kentucky. The conference centered around the release of two books examining education reform efforts in the state.¹ The participants included many key players in Kentucky reform including former Governor Wallace Wilkinson, Jack Foster (Wilkinson's secretary of education), Thomas Boysen (first state education commissioner under KERA), David Hornbeck (consultant), David Karem (state legislator), Robert Sexton (executive director for the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence) as well as a number of researchers who have studied the reform.

Conference participants agreed that the process of reform in Kentucky was difficult and stressful. Prior to the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA), the state had ranked at or near the bottom on almost every education indicator. A 1989 lawsuit challenging the state's finance formula for public schools resulted in a state supreme court decision that declared the state's entire system of schooling unconstitutional. The court ordered the General Assembly to restructure "the entire sweep of the system - all its parts and parcels."² This decision was the impetus for the reform legislation that tackled curriculum, finance, and governance issues simultaneously. At the time, this reform package was radical in its emphasis on *all* children and in its scope. A decade later, the structures and processes created by KERA are still in place.

Conference presentations and discussions focused on the findings from ten years of research and the lessons learned from the Kentucky reform experience. The following research findings are a summary of those presented at the conference. They are reported in much greater detail in the books mentioned above.

- ▶ **Student achievement has improved.** Statewide, student test scores have increased on the state assessment, CTBS, and NAEP. Researchers report that students write more and better. Beyond higher test scores, students have benefitted from curricular alignment with state standards and better equipped classrooms. Increased funding under KERA has resulted in improved school facilities, new support programs, technology resources, and a wider variety of instructional materials aimed at improving teaching and learning.
- ▶ **Socio-economic status is not a major factor in school improvement.** In the past

¹*All Children Can Learn: Lessons from the Kentucky Reform Experience.*

Roger S. Pankratz and Joseph M. Petrosko, editors. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 2000

Elementary Change: Moving Toward Systemic School Reform in Rural Kentucky.

Patricia J. Kannapel, Lola Aagaard, Pamela Coe, and Cynthia A. Reeves.

Charleston, WV: AEL, Inc. 2000.

²*Rose v. Council for Better Education*, 60 Ky. 1289, 790 S.W. 2d 186 (1989).

decade, a few schools in Kentucky's most impoverished areas have been able to raise achievement levels to rank among the best in the state. Research indicates that factors such as school leadership, teacher quality, and a school wide belief that all children can achieve can lead to high levels of achievement in high poverty schools.

- ▶ **Assessment and accountability can be powerful motivators to improve performance.**
The precise effects of Kentucky's assessment and accountability systems have been debated, but the system did get educators' attention and generated discussion and activity focused on improving curriculum, instruction, and student learning.
- ▶ **Targeted intervention can be highly effective in improving test scores.**
The distinguished educator program has been highly successful in providing intensive technical assistance to low-performing schools. The program has been so successful that the Department of Education created the Kentucky Leadership Academy to share strategies with school leaders across the state.

The achievements of the last ten years have not met all expectations, but the above findings provide clear evidence that progress has been made. Kentucky's experiences provide valuable insight into the issues of education reform and lessons to guide future efforts to improve education throughout the United States. Presenters at the Louisville conference addressed two categories of important lessons to be derived from the Kentucky experience: political lessons and policy lessons.

POLITICAL LESSONS

- ▶ **Maintain the integrity of the legislation.**
Keeping the integrity of the legislation was key. A joint executive-legislative task force was created to redesign the state's system of public education. The task force controlled the process that created the legislation and stood firm against efforts to modify it. Maintaining the integrity of the legislation was essential as every element of the reform was important to the whole. The connections between the strands of the reform package were critical because the system works only if the pieces work together.
- ▶ **Build and sustain a coalition to support the work of reform.**
Passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act was just the beginning of the reform process. Without widespread support for change, it is unlikely that KERA would have endured. Organized citizen and business groups helped sustain the reform effort by communicating the need for reform to the general public, emphasizing that this was a long-term change and not a quick fix, and generating funds from private foundations to disseminate information and research about KERA.
- ▶ **Stay the course.**
The state legislature, state board of education, and the department of education have all demonstrated a consistent commitment to improving education for all students and to adjusting reform strategies based on information from schools. Citizen and business groups also played a vital role in influencing policymakers to stay the course on reform.

POLICY LESSONS

- ▶ **Reform and funding must go hand in hand.**
KERA included not only an assessment and accountability system centered around specific goals and expectations, but provided increased funding for programs and resources to help educators improve teaching and learning in their schools and classrooms. Increased resources mattered. The work cannot be replicated without dealing with the resource question.

- ▶ **The importance of good assessment.** For reform to impact what happens in the classroom, rich assessments are needed that reflect the work students are expected to do. Key players in the reform recognized that they underestimated the complexity of technical issues of assessment and accountability. Kentucky's accountability test was modified in 1998 based on the results of a task force appointed by Governor Patton to study the assessment program and there are on-going efforts to study and improve the system. For the past decade, the focus on whole school improvement as measured by the state assessment has overshadowed the need to improve achievement for all students. Good assessment includes not only an accountability test to measure school success, but continuous assessment to measure individual student progress.

- ▶ **It is not enough to test and set high standards.** There must be support programs in place to ensure that all students have the support that they need to achieve at high levels. Through grants funded under KERA, eligible schools established family resource and youth services centers to serve students and their families who are experiencing problems that may impede learning. The reform also established the extended school services program to enable schools to provide extra instruction to students who need it. Teachers also need support in implementing reforms. Kentucky's experience indicates that standards are not enough to ensure that appropriate curriculum or instructional strategies will be employed to meet those standards. Teachers don't have the time to write curriculum while teaching and therefore need guidance in developing curriculum and instructional practices that enable them to teach to the standards.
Ensuring the learning of *each* student is a necessary step to realizing the vision of high academic achievement for *all* students. Schools are faced with increasing numbers of students with diverse backgrounds, abilities, and special needs. Teachers need assistance in developing strategies for helping diverse learners reach high levels of achievement.

- ▶ **Good communication is essential between reform designers and implementers.** Teachers in Kentucky had an episodic grasp of KERA. They didn't always see how the pieces fit together. The overarching goal of KERA - ensuring that each and every student achieves KERA goals - got lost in the initial push to implement the various strands of the reform. Continuous communication about the goals and purposes of the reform are essential in order for implementers to have a full understanding of what they are doing and why. Communication never stops. There are always new teachers, students and parents who do not have a clear understanding of Kentucky's educational goals and strategies.

The most important lesson learned from Kentucky may be the importance of learning from experience. Kentucky has learned much from the experience of implementing a comprehensive reform. They continue to work on fine-tuning the system as they continue to learn. The lessons learned have resulted in a focus on continuing to build better assessments, create more productive professional development, and develop better ways of communicating results. Reform has only begun in Kentucky. Few schools have been able to put the various pieces together successfully and the goal of high achievement for all students has yet to be reached. Reform is an on-going process requiring periodic adjustments, local adaptations, and time for participants to learn new strategies. Kentucky policymakers have shown the willingness to learn and make the necessary adjustments. The successes and failures of Kentucky's efforts have increased our knowledge of the reform process and provide useful information for Kentucky and other states to guide future policy decisions.



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Signature: Cynthia Reeves	Printed Name/Position/Title: Cynthia Reeves Senior Project Associate	
Organization/Address: Council of Chief State School Officers	Telephone: 202-336-7004	FAX: 202-371-1766
	E-Mail Address: cynthia.r@cesso.org	Date: 6-5-01

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