viewpoint

New Funding Should Renew Commitment to Improving Education

The reviews of the 2006 legislative session have been pretty good, especially when it comes to education funding. More investments in technology, preschool, teacher pay, additional days and reading and math instruction provides plenty of reason to celebrate.

It will be important, as the money flows into programs in the months ahead, to focus on the improvements in student achievement that it's meant to bring. A focus on results for students, after all, is the point of Kentucky's education improvement efforts.

By Robert F. Sexton
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And, although we've hardly had time to catch our breath since the final gavel fell on this year's session, we have no time to spare in planning what could or should come next. That's the thing about momentum (which the session has provided). It takes deliberate action to sustain it. It isn't just going to happen on its own.

The latest progress notwithstanding, there is and always will be plenty of room for improvement. Indeed, the whole continuous improvement concept that frames Kentucky's plans for education applies to policy initiatives as much as it does to the classroom performance of students.

So, where do we go now? Here are some possibilities.

Teacher pay. The raises approved for 2006-08 were welcome and overdue. But there was a missed opportunity here – the chance to improve the teaching profession while salaries were increased. Differentiated or incentive pay has been proposed by the governor and championed by Rep. Harry Moberly, chairman of the House Appropriations and Revenue Committee, and others. But a proposal didn't make it through the legislature this time.

We need to consider how to revamp the way we pay teachers to reward the best performers and provide incentives to teachers who take on the most difficult challenges. Other states, including Minnesota and Florida, are putting programs in place, and many school districts around the country have proposals on the table. If every Kentucky student deserves a highly-qualified teacher — and they do — then Kentucky needs to join this movement. And we must involve teachers in every step of the process.

High school improvement. The progress here has been very encouraging, with the state Board of Education increasing graduation requirements, allowing student credit for content mastery (not just seat time) and the legislature approving a pilot program for end-of-course exams — not to mention exciting developments in high schools across the state.

This is a strong start, but much remains to be done. Let's encourage path-breaking high schools, obliterate the high school-college disconnect, reinvent the senior year, get the qualified teachers we need for math, science and other critical courses, personalize schools so every student is connected to a caring adult and make the ninth grade a successful transition, especially for struggling students.

The results of the 2006 legislature offer some comfort to those who are pushing for more school improvement. But the pushing must continue.

Early childhood. Preschool funding will improve as a result of the Gov. Fletcher's leadership and the legislature's action, but we're still only reaching children whose families' incomes are 150 percent of poverty. Pushing that threshold to 200 percent would mean 4,670 more children would be eligible for the state preschool program. And research has shown that nothing gets results like quality early education for low-income students. We also need to push for state funding for all-day kindergarten, which failed to win legislative approval this time; focus on improved training and qualifications for all early childhood workers; and find a way to get more early childhood programs to participate in the state rating system, among other things.

Insurance and retirement. We simply must start paying attention to the percentage of the education budget that is gobbled up by increasing health insurance and retirement costs. Of the cumulative total funding increase for education from 1996 to 2008, *48 percent* was consumed by these personnel expenses — not for classroom help for students. (See the chart on Page 7 that shows how these areas are growing.) These costs will increase to the point where they become a huge drain on school funding. Public schools and indeed all government, like private businesses, must find a way to deal with this gathering financial storm.

Business and community involvement. Kentucky employers, by way of the state Chamber of Commerce, provided critical support for education during the 2006 session. That work, along with the Business Forum on Kentucky Education report issued last year, represents a highly positive development furthering the improvement of Kentucky schools. We must sustain and expand the role of employers at both the state policy and local levels and do it in a way that engages every school's broader community of parents, advocates and concerned citizens. We know, from state test scores and other evidence, that the best schools are those where communities care and people are involved.

The results of the 2006 legislative session offer some comfort to those of us who are always pushing for more when it comes to school improvement. But the pushing must continue. There's no virtue in low aspirations.

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