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Linchpin to education: teaching

After \$2 billion in grants to schools yielded almost no improvement in student achievement, the Gates Foundation refocused its efforts this year on what really counts: teaching.

This is one point on which research and common sense converge. The only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction.

No amount of spending or reductions in student-teacher ratios can make up for ineffective teaching.

Proven ways to improve teaching are detailed in a 2007 study, "How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out On Top."

The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence recently heard from one of the authors, Sir Michael Barber, whose findings would make a fine starting point for the task force that Gov. Steve Beshear is recruiting to develop post-KERA reforms.

The researchers found that high-performing and fast-improving school systems have three things in common:

1. Getting the right people to become teachers.
2. Developing them into effective instructors.
3. Ensuring the system can deliver the best possible instruction for every child.

Getting the right teachers requires greater selectivity and higher starting pay. The best systems recruit top students into teaching and frontload compensation. This country now recruits teachers from the bottom third of high school graduates and makes them wait years for decent pay.

Developing effective instructors requires much more practice and coaching in the classroom, plus weeding out those who can't improve.

Delivering the best possible instruction to every child requires systems for identifying and promptly meeting individual needs. Emphasis is on promptly. Students, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, can lose all prospect of success if not well taught in pre-school and early grades.

"Taken together, all the evidence suggests that even in good systems, students that do not progress quickly during their first years at school, because they are not exposed to teachers of sufficient calibre, stand very little chance of recovering the lost years."

In the most successful systems, principals, highly trained in leadership, spend 80 percent of their time focused on instruction.

"The high-performing systems are better at ensuring that each student receives the instruction they need to compensate for their home background. ... They ensure that resources and funding are targeted at those students who need them most, not those who need them least."

High expectations and systems for measuring student progress are also critical.

Around the globe and in this country, there are examples of education systems that have made large and rapid gains by dramatically improving teaching.

While these ideas make sense, they require cultural changes that some would find threatening.

In a world of rapid change, though, the riskiest path is to avoid change. Kentuckians must insist that the next round of education reform delivers better teaching.

"How The World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top" can be found at www.mckinsey.com/client/service/socialsector/resources/pdf/Worlds_School_systems_final.pdf

