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EDITORIALS

Raising the bar

Twenty years ago, state legislators passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act in response to a court decision holding that equal instructional expectations should apply to children in rich and poor counties. It's fitting that Kentucky, one of America's poorest states, became the first in the nation Wednesday to adopt the concept of national standards for English and math to help level the field.

The "Common Core State Standards Initiative" is supposed to ensure high school graduates entering college or the workplace have had the same basic opportunities whether they got educated in the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest or West. On a broader scale, it could gird the nation for global competition that too often finds goals set higher for students abroad than for American young people.

Even after KERA, Kentucky high school graduates have been at a disadvantage when they progressed to higher education, in the commonwealth or elsewhere, and competed with scholars from states where more is demanded of graduates. The Council on Postsecondary Education found that almost half of the students entering Kentucky's colleges and universities required remedial instruction in at least one area.

The issue of double standards came up in Franklin County last year when the school board reviewed its graduation rules with an eye to curtailing dropouts. The county system overall required its students to exceed the statewide minimum of 22 credits for graduation so some board members were skeptical when it was proposed the level be dropped to the state minimum for the Phoenix Academy, the special school that helps problem students stay in the classroom and get their diplomas. However, the board did vote unanimously last month to approve the reduced standard for academy participants. Graduates of Western Hills or Franklin County High School still must complete 27 or 26 credits, respectively.

Of course, the number of credits students earn enroute to graduation day is less critical than the rigor of instruction in the courses they take. The adequacy of their preparation for bigger challenges ahead is what matters most.

If the new national standards work in practice, they should help correct deficiencies in KERA which left many young people ill-prepared for life after high school. Teachers will have flexibility in deciding how to reach a higher plateau and their success or failure will be measured by new exams soon to replace the old Commonwealth Accountability Testing System, as ordered by the 2009 General Assembly. Most importantly, Kentucky elementary and secondary schools must work toward performance competitive with other states.

"There will be more consistency, so that what represents success in Kentucky matches that in North Dakota and North Carolina," said Gov. Steve Beshear, who attended Wednesday's joint meeting of the state Board of Education, Council on Postsecondary Education and Education Professional Standards Board.

Now that Kentucky has led the way in adopting new criteria, teachers and parents must motivate children to aim higher and offer the guidance they need to reach their goals. The time for excuses is past.