# Love of learning is elusive goal for state educators

## Local systems say they're trying but state help needed

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As Gov. Ernie Fletcher rode through Independence, Ky., in the back of a black Corvette convertible, a girl stopped him – to check out his car.

She said she liked it and knew she would have to study hard in school so she could land a good job to pay for something that nice.

"It is the small things that inspire people," Fletcher said Wednesday at the Kentucky Board of Education meeting. He stopped in to share his thoughts on and plans for Kentucky's educational system.

In order to bring up test scores, educators first have to instill a love of education in every student and help the community and families to see the value of education, Fletcher said.

"Education is a pathway to opportunity," Fletcher said. "Without it, young people will never realize their full potential."

Franklin County High School juniors Shana Faesy and Andrew Meszaros said they already have a love of education thanks to enthusiastic teachers.

"When teachers love teaching and make learning fun, they make you have a love of education," Meszaros said.

The juniors cited Kerry Casey and Tom Marshall as two of their favorite teachers. Casey teaches physics, which most people would not consider an exciting subject, Meszaros said.

"But he makes it really fun," Meszaros said. "He uses less bookwork and more hands on projects to keep it interesting."

Faesy has Marshall for English. She said it is not only his teaching style but his personality that make his class enjoyable.

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"He jokes around, but still tells you what you need to know," Faesy said.

Frankfort Independent Schools Superintendent Judith Lucarelli said giving students a love of learning and informing the community about the value of education is important, but hard to do. She said there is no way to know that certain actions will guarantee a community will value education or a student now loves to learning.

However, she said she thinks Frankfort students have a love of school, if not education.

"We are on break and when I come to work each morning, I see kids still hanging around Frankfort High, because it is a place they want to be, where they feel comfortable and safe," Lucarelli said. "That is the culture of our schools and has been for more than 100 years. It makes it less complicated to engage students in school when the school itself is a place they want to be."

The district is able to continue that culture because it is small and offers students a lot of personal contact, Lucarelli said.

The Franklin County school system tries to inform the community as much as possible and offer students a variety of courses to match their interests, said Wayne Dominick, communications coordinator. He said that is why the district revamped the Franklin County Career and Technical Center, because not all students want to go to a four-year college and the district needed to prepare them to be successful in whatever path they chose.

That is what Fletcher said he was after – offering incentives to learn and engaging ways to do it.

But that takes money, Dominick said.

"If they would fully fund education, we could offer more opportunities for students, hire more teachers and have smaller classes," Dominick said. "We could do a lot more if we had more money, but right now we are limited to the money we have."

When Fletcher came to office, there was a budget shortfall and therefore fewer resources to go around, he said. While revenue is growing, the legislature still has challenges ahead with the increasing Medicaid and health-care costs.

Medicaid composes 10 percent of the budget right now, Fletcher said. Unless the state makes some changes, Medicaid will be 20 percent of the budget in 2010.

Health-care costs also are skyrocketing. Fletcher said the state has funded education, but much of the funding has gone to health care for teachers.

Earlier in the board meeting, Kentucky Department of Education Associate Commissioner Robin Kinney said health-care costs are expected to increase 13.6 percent for the 2007 school year – $64 million – and 13.5 percent for the 2008 school year – $72 million.

Dominick said he thinks the health-care issue is "another excuse to not adequately fund education."

"They promised these teachers that they would fund their health care and now (legislators) are complaining because they have to," Dominick said. "This is just another crutch for why they are not sufficiently funding education."

The tax burden has fallen to the local level because no one at the state level will do anything about taxes, Dominick said.

The state may still contribute roughly the same amount of money, but the percentage of the cost it represents for local districts has significantly decreased, Lucarelli said.

"It has not been keeping up with the cost of education, so we have had to cut back on programs or dig into our reserves," Lucarelli said. "The contingency fund is the lowest it has been in years."

Fletcher said he is committed to adequately fund education. He said it is a major focus for his administration. One reason is because an educated workforce means a more competitive economy worldwide, Fletcher said.

The marketplace is increasingly more technical, Fletcher said. So, schools must offer a rigorous math and science curriculum to prepare students for college or the job market.

Technology was one of the board's budget priorities for this year. It is requesting $25 million for the 2007 and 2008 fiscal years.

It also made a 5 percent increase in state funding for salaries and retirement fund match for teachers and staff, an additional instructional and professional development day each year (a total of four additional days by 2008) and adequately funding preschool priorities.

Fletcher said Wednesday he is committed to adequately funding preschool.

However, both Lucarelli and Dominick said it would be nice if the state would first fund all-day kindergarten, which both districts offer. Right now, the state pays for half-day kindergarten, but studies show full-day kindergarten results in high test scores and fewer students needing special services or reading intervention.

"It gives them a sound start on their education," Lucarelli said.

If the state funded all-day kindergarten, that would have "a tremendous impact" on the local district budgets, Lucarelli said. It would be saving the district the cost of paying for one and a half teachers and one and a half aides out of pocket.

However, full-day kindergarten is "an expensive proposition," said Mike Goins, Fletcher's spokesman. He said Fletcher's staff looked into the issue, but found many school districts wanted to concentrate on preschool.

"They have the belief or the philosophy that the earliest students get started on the right path, the more everything falls into place," Goins said.

Elkhorn Elementary preschool teacher Jayme Boswell said she would love if the state opened up preschool to all children.

Preschool is a stepping stone for students, a building block for kindergarten, said Kelley Ann Bush, Elkhorn Elementary kindergarten teacher.

Not only are the preschool students knowledgeable about shapes, colors, numbers and letters, they know how to follow the rules, are more likely to share and are more comfortable in the school environment, resulting in fewer tears the first week of school, Bush said.

Boswell also would like for preschool to become full-day. She said the majority of her afternoon class speaks English as a second language.

"That would give them even more time to be immersed in an English-speaking class," Boswell said.

However, she said she knows how much either of those options would cost.

"I am thankful we even have the money for half-day preschool," Boswell said.