



School Facilities, Leadership and Learning: **A study of seven state-managed districts**

In 1990 through the action of the Kentucky Supreme Court, the Kentucky General Assembly enacted the Kentucky Educational Reform Act (KERA). Though initially focused on financial reform, the Act had many components to accomplish the education equity and adequacy mission described in the Kentucky Constitution and the Rose vs. Council for Better Education Kentucky Supreme Court decision. Its ongoing charge among other things was to systemically attack all areas of education, by providing necessary leadership, resources, and controls (for accountability) to enhance student performance.

In the early days of reform, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) (especially the Office of Management Assistance via KRS 158.785) and the Office of Education Accountability (OEA) (via Chapter Seven of the Kentucky Revised Statutes) fought an education war on many fronts, including unfortunately the management and assistance of some local school districts. KRS 158.785 provides the Kentucky Board of Education the responsibility to promulgate regulations regarding procedures and criteria for local district management audits. Article 5 of KRS 158.785 provides that the Chief State School Officer shall establish the following criteria (documented by the management audit) when making a recommendation to the Kentucky Board of Education to designate a local school district as a “state-assisted or state-managed district”:

- The existence of a pattern of a significant lack of efficiency and effectiveness in the governance or administration of the school district.
- The pattern of a significant lack of efficiency and effectiveness in the governance or administration of the school district continues to exist
- State assistance or state management is necessary to correct the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness.

Districts so described and approved by the Kentucky Board of Education (KBE)(via KBE’s general powers, KRS 156.132) were judged to be “nonfeasance” in their local leadership and management activities and in direct conflict with the language of the Kentucky Constitution (Section 183, note 2, Power of the Legislature, Rose vs. Council for Better Education) which called for an “efficient system of common schools”, that is “operated with no waste, no duplication, no mismanagement, and with no political influence”.

In the opinion of a ranking education official at the time, such districts “did not have the local capacity to lead and manage a school district”. The districts often fostered the needs of adults

over the needs of students, sometimes erring out of a lack of knowledge and skill, and sometimes erring with intent and occasionally corruption. It was the constitutional responsibility of the General Assembly, Kentucky Board of Education, and State education leaders to seek accountability in these districts for nonfeasance actions to ensure education adequacy. Although often perceived as punitive by local districts, the goal was to help them develop the leadership capacity to effectively manage themselves. In extreme cases (per KRS 156.132) some board members and superintendents were removed from state-managed districts, but in all cases, local leaders and decision-making were maintained as part of a transformation process. The idea was to help provide the necessary resources to build leadership ability and maintain continuity.

The well-intended actions of the State Board, KDE, and OEA were not always effective, sometimes frustrating, and often unappreciated. This was unpioneered territory; it required new intervention strategies, skills, and ongoing herculean effort at both the local and state levels. There was a great need for local and state partnerships. It was essential, but sometimes difficult to build relationships in an environment of distrust. Some districts benefitted greatly from the interventions, others not so much. In every case, however, local decision-making improved. Sometimes improvement came through education of the new laws and opportunities, sometimes from intervention, and other times it came through attrition, where local leaders eventually developed a student-centered culture on their own. Twenty years later, after the State interventions, largely due to better local leadership and the financial resources provided by Education Reform, these districts are significantly improved, delivering quality education programs.

Seven of the early state-managed districts were Whitley County, Pike County, Floyd County, Harlan County, Letcher County, Knox County, and Metcalfe County. Each of these districts was unique in its challenges and none should be categorized unfairly by the statutory criteria above. On the other hand, there was a great need in these districts to furnish necessary resources and to ensure that the new laws enacted in 1990 were having the desired effect on student opportunity. In the early 1990s due to their systemic inefficiency and lack of resources, these districts' facilities' programs were ranked among the state's poorest. This is not to say that there were not many others in a similar state of disrepair, but for a variety of reasons, they were identified to be state-assisted. Their building conditions, organizational structure, capital planning, resources, management, maintenance, cost of delivery of services, and general decision-making, all needed improvements.

Declining Enrollment and Average Daily Attendance (ADA):

It is a bit difficult today to imagine that 20 years ago, these districts (especially their facilities programs) were in such disarray. Over the next 20 years, except for Whitley, these districts would also face one of the most difficult education management challenges; declining enrollment. Not only did they have to build leadership capacity to do the "normal things" to have school, but they also had to develop a high level of skill to understand the anatomy of their declining demographic and its potential negative impact on student learning. All (even Whitley) would face unprecedented fiscal, staffing, curriculum, planning, and program challenges, including school consolidation and rebuilding a crumbling infrastructure. Where in their history they had experienced growth (more students and funds, more programs, more staff, etc.), now

they would experience declining attendance and funding. Without the districts making appropriate, timely, and difficult decisions, these challenges would sink even the best flagship school district. It is an amazing feat that all were able to meet the challenges successfully. Not only did they survive, but arguably as districts, they may have made the greatest education progress in Kentucky over the past 20 years when you consider the systemic improvements they have made, and the progress in their leadership, facility, and academic programs. It is perhaps one of the greatest stories of the Kentucky Education Reform Act.

Per KRS 157.310, Fund to Support Education Excellence in Kentucky (SEEK), all local and state revenue for the system of Common Schools is based on the average daily attendance, which includes operational funds as well as capital funds for the construction of new schools and the renovation of existing schools. Except for Whitley, and perhaps Metcalfe, the declining student population (by itself) created nothing short of a facility, and educational crisis in the districts. Four of the seven lost more students than the average school district serves in Kentucky.

School Building Conditions:

Per 702 KAR 4:180, The Kentucky School Facility Planning Manual, all Kentucky public school facilities are evaluated by licensed architects and engineers with standard criteria, including educational suitability, on a 1 to 5 scale; with 1 being new and 5 being the poorest condition. Ratings are based on functional age which considers the last date of construction and renovation. A rating of 1 is new (or newly renovated), whose functional age is 0 to 10 years old, 2 is 10 to 20 years old (or that period since major renovation), 3 is 20 to 30 years old (or that period since major renovation), 4 is 30 to 40 years old (or that period since major renovation), and 5 is over 40 years old (or that period since major renovation). In general, a school's life cycle (or renovation cycle) is about 30 years, meaning that after 30 years, most building systems (except structure) will need replacing. Schools rated category 1,2 or 3 are considered to be equitable and adequate, whereas schools rated a 4 or 5 are deficient and are designated as a construction priority for renovation (if feasible), or replacement on the district's long-range capital plan.

In the seven districts, a net total of 33 schools were closed (or will be closed when current construction projects are completed) representing a reduction in building capacity of 6,250 students. The effort included consolidating 3 high schools into one in Harlan, Letcher, and Pike counties generating about \$700,000 annually in each of those districts. The total operational savings generated among all seven districts was about \$17,000,000 annually. In addition to dealing with declining enrollments, each of the seven districts simultaneously successfully rebuilt the balance of their education facilities. Just about all seven achieved (or are close to achieving) the benchmark best practice of 90% or more facilities in good to new condition, which is necessary to sustain a quality educational program.

In addition to the academic information above, recently Harlan County noted a 1.1 increase in ACT scores in the past two years. They also increased proficiency in math from 11.44% in 2002 to 65.33% in 2011. Likewise, they increased reading proficiency from 39.40% to 73.26% over the same period. Their dual credit program with Cumberland College has offered college credit for the Harlan County Black Bear students.

In the 2008 Kentucky Department of Education's school academic data, Floyd and Whitley counties had three schools, and Pike County had seven 7, scoring over 100 (proficiency).

Resources Strategies and Outcomes:

Although the effectiveness of state management can be argued, the financial and leadership resources provided by the Kentucky Education Reform Act assisted local leaders to build quality education programs (including facilities) in Kentucky school districts, statewide. In all of the seven districts, The Facility Support Program of Kentucky (KRS 157.440), Capital Outlay (KRS.157.420), School Facilities Construction Commission (KRS 157.620), and Urgent Needs through various budget bills were utilized as state and local facility resources. Metcalfe and Pike County recently levied Urgent Needs five-cent facility levies (per \$100 assessed property value) as required by the 2010 biennial budget bill to help them achieve their facility goals. Also in the seven districts, over the 20 years, state officials strategically made available Clinton Grants, Qualified Zone Academy Bonds, New Market Tax Credits, Qualified School Construction Bonds, and Rebuild America Bonds as federal capital construction resources to help meet their facility needs.

The seven Kentucky districts included herein are to be honored and complimented for their facility and education progress as are many others that had similar school facility and management challenges. They and their state counterparts have learned that you must first develop leadership to build a quality district support infrastructure that includes finance, facilities, transportation, and student services before you can achieve academic success. Connecting facilities and learning is sometimes difficult to ascertain and requires careful research. These seven districts happen to have significant improvement in both education areas, but more research would be necessary to draw any learning /facility connections. What is sure however is both learning and facility education facets are enhanced by quality leadership. Over time with better resources, the seven districts developed leadership that is committed to continuous improvement, quality results, and "finishing the job" in both facilities and student proficiency. They truly have developed student-centered cultures and decision-making, and are equipped with the necessary result-oriented strategies to provide all children with a quality education.