

Editorial & Opinions ENOUGH

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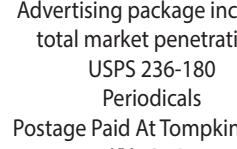
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KERA architect spreads fake news

By JIM WATERS



David Hornbeck, an architect of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) who describes

himself as a "consultant to the Kentucky legislature, 1989-1990," claims in a recent op-ed: "Kentucky's children have made more progress than those of any other state in the nation."

For such a claim to hold up under scrutiny of the evidence – something Hornbeck fails to provide even in the least amount to support his sunny analysis – it must totally disregard what happened to Kentucky's black students, the commonwealth's largest racial minority, after KERA came along.

Only four of the 28 states with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) eighth-grade math data needed to compare progress among black students from 1990 – the earliest available – to 2015 improved less than Kentucky's blacks.

Meanwhile, other southern states – North Carolina, Louisiana, Georgia and Arkansas – matched or exceeded the national-average increase in black students' math scores between 1990 and 2015.

Can it just be coincidence that each of those states has for years allowed primarily minority, low-income parents the opportunity to choose what's often a better education alternative for their children: charter schools?

It's not coincidental that Kentucky never came close to any of these states in terms of academic improvement among its poor black children without allowing that option, which the General Assembly has now made available with passage of charter-school legislation during the waning days of this year's legislative session.

Neither is it happenstance that KERA's most ardent defenders – including teachers-union representatives and longtime members of the education establishment – provide the most zealous opposition to school choice and feverishly hope the charter-school movement fails in the Bluegrass State.

At the very least, Hornbeck's claim of "more progress" made by Kentucky's children than in "any other state" shatters once you realize the commonwealth's eighth-grade blacks improved by only one paltry point on NAEP reading scores between 1998 and 2015.

Is Hornbeck unaware of the performance of black students in Tennessee, which ranks fourth nationally for its increase in eighth-grade reading scores during that same 17-year period?

Might this be a good place to mention that Volunteer State parents have had the option of charter schools during all but four years of that 17-year period?

Travel further south to Florida, which offers a multitude of school-choice options in addition to charter schools, including vouchers, tax-credit scholarships and open-enrollment choices.

There you will find a state where black students, who trailed their fellow blacks in Kentucky by 10 points in 1998, are now four points ahead.

Hornbeck's claim that Kentucky is a nation-beater doesn't even hold up among Kentucky's white students.

Whites comprise 80 percent of the commonwealth's public-school population but only statistically significantly outscored their fellow whites in just two other states in eighth-grade math scores in 2015.

House Bill 940, which passed in 1990 and is better known as KERA, declares in Section 3: "Schools shall expect a high level of achievement from all students."

Did Hornbeck, operating in his "consultant" role, get paid to write that sentence?

If so, doesn't he owe taxpayers a refund considering the lack of progress among our neediest students since KERA became law 27 years ago?

These are the very kids who most need charter schools and are the primary reason why House Bill 520 -- which finally opens the doors to charters in Kentucky -- made it through this year's legislature.

Disadvantaged kids also are the reason why we must make sure local boards of education, which HB 520 designates as sole authorizers in 171 of Kentucky's 173 school districts, give charter-school applicants a fair shot – something too many of these students haven't found in our commonwealth's KERA-based, one-size-fits-all public education system.

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