

Editorial & Opinions ENOUGH


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Kentucky General Assembly Last Week in Frankfort

Special to **JOBE PUBLISHING, INC.**

FRANKFORT -- It has been a reoccurring theme in recent years. In each legislative session, lawmakers take aim at the latest challenges posed by the state's opioid epidemic. The ever-evolving nature of this crisis means that every time lawmakers meet there are emerging issues to consider as our state puts new laws on the books to keep drugs off the streets, support a strained criminal justice system, provide treatment to those who need it, and repair the damage caused to families and communities across the state.

This year, lawmakers are considering increased spending to target the opioid crisis. While the budget plan proposed by Gov. Matt Bevin would prompt cuts to many parts of government, it would provide a \$34 million spending increase to fight the state's opioid addiction epidemic. Members of the Kentucky House of Representatives are currently considering the entire spending plan.

In addition to addressing the drug crisis through the budget, lawmakers are also studying bills that would help keep drugs off the streets, improve treatment opportunities, and offer more drug-prevention education.

One of those measures took a step forward last week. House Bill 148 would help keep controlled substances like liquid morphine and fentanyl patches out of the hands of drug abusers by requiring the safe disposal of controlled substances by hospice providers or those providing palliative care or end-of-life service upon a patient's death. The bill was approved by the House last week and has been delivered to the Senate for its consideration.

Bills on other issues that advanced last week include the following:

- House Bill 3 would require K-12 schools to incorporate basic workplace etiquette and skills into their curriculum beginning with the 2019-2020 school year. After being approved by the House Education Committee this week, it now goes

to the full House for consideration.

- House Bill 128 would require public middle and high schools in Kentucky to teach students about the Holocaust. The bill now goes to the full House for consideration.
- House Bill 169 would crack down on the growing recruitment of criminal gang members in the state by making it a felony for adults to engage in criminal gang recruitment. Criminal gang recruitment by a minor would be a misdemeanor for a first offense but would rise to felony level for all other offenses under the bill. The bill was approved by the House Judiciary Committee and now goes to the full House for consideration.
- Senate Bill 38 would modify current statutes regarding pregnant and nursing women in the workforce. With modified job options, frequent breaks and a private space for breastfeeding in the workplace, the goal of SB 38 is to ensure fair treatment and equal opportunities on the job. With a 9-0 vote in the Senate Judiciary Committee this week, the bill now goes to the Senate floor for further consideration.
- Senate Bill 106 would create a limited license for beauty salons to provide only blow-drying and styling services. Currently in Kentucky, these types of businesses must obtain a full salon license and employ only trained cosmetologists. With hopes to reduce regulations and increase opportunities, the bill has passed the Senate and has been sent to the House for consideration.
- Senate Bill 91 would strengthen an existing law that requires Kentucky cities to have yearly audits by allowing the state to withhold money from a city that does not comply. Passing the Senate by a 37-0 vote, it now goes to the House for further consideration.

If you'd like to offer feedback to state lawmakers on issues under consideration, please call the General Assembly's toll-free message line at 1-800-372-7181.

Truth about teachers' salaries

By **JIM WATERS**
Special to **JOBE PUBLISHING, INC.**

"Things as certain as death and taxes, can be more firmly believed," wrote 18th century English writer Daniel Defoe in "The Political History of the Devil."



"As certain as death and taxes" is the fact that discussions with defenders of Kentucky's mediocre public-education system will be dominated by claims of underfunding schools, underpaying teachers and poverty as excuses for that mediocrity.

Because such claims rarely are supported by credible data, Defoe's conclusion that anything that certain "can be more firmly believed" is where the analogy – at least as it relates to public-education bureaucrats' predictable claims – breaks down.

For example, on a recent edition of KET's "Kentucky Tonight," Tom Shelton, executive director of the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents, was asked by host Renee Shaw what teachers need to ensure better educational attainment?

"The main thing that's missing for our teachers is that our teachers, first of all, are underpaid as compared to their peers," Shelton grumbled.

There was no "second of all," and the only conclusion Shelton offered is: teachers are saints while taxpayers are stingy.

"I think that the job that our teachers do, considering the pay that they receive and the lack of financial support they have – is phenomenal in our school system," Shelton said.

While Kentucky has great teachers, how believable are these cynical statements about "financial support," considering taxpayers will fork over an additional \$1.2 billion to the Teachers' Retirement System in the current state budget, which Gov. Matt Bevin proposes increasing to \$2.3 billion this year?

Shelton said he appreciated Bevin's commitment to funding pensions – even acknowledging that teachers receive generous benefits – before returning to his narrative that teachers are headed to the poor house.

Brigitte Blom Ramsey, executive director of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, maintains the average career teacher in the commonwealth makes around \$50,000 and concedes a National Education Association claim indicating Kentucky teachers' salaries are at the median – 26th out of the 50 states.

Shelton also contends Kentucky teachers' pay is not comparable to surrounding states.

There's a credibility issue with that statement, however, since he and his fellow education-establishment types don't seem interested in evaluating those same states' policies that counter their ideology.

If Shelton's going to point to surrounding states regarding teachers' salaries, will he also support emulating their parental-choice policies?

Will he, for example, support emulating Indiana's highly competitive education environment, including its myriad public and private school-choice options?

I digress.

While Kentucky teachers' salaries rank near the middle, the Census reports the commonwealth's median household income ranks near the very bottom at No. 47.

Incredibly, Ramsey and Shelton both claim the need for "reinvestment" – code for "higher taxes" – in public education, even though Kentucky taxpayers' incomes already are sorely strained in compensating teachers at a national-median level.

Shelton to his credit acknowledges that transportation funding and policy – an issue Bevin took on in his budget speech and takes heat for from Shelton's fellow status-quo defenders – could benefit from "a whole lot of efficiencies."

Shelton notes that while our more rural districts would feel the impact of state transportation funding cuts for local school districts, "in our more urban and suburban districts, fewer and fewer kids ride a bus."

Enquiring minds want to know: if fewer students board buses in "urban and suburban districts," why is Jefferson County Public Schools' transportation budget surpassing \$100 million this year?

Defoe's death-and-taxes line was adapted years later by Margaret Mitchell in her classic "Gone with the Wind."

"Death, taxes and childbirth!" Mitchell rants. "There's never any convenient time for any of them."

Will there ever be a convenient time for inconvenient truth about the funding and performance of Kentucky's education system?

Jim Waters is president and CEO of the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions, Kentucky's free-market think tank. Read previous columns at www.bipps.org. He can be reached at jwaters@freedomkentucky.com and [@bipps](https://twitter.com/bipps) on Twitter.

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