

Reed: Record high educational investment and prioritization

How many times have you heard that we need to spend more on education? As a legislator, I hear it regularly, but I am often met with silence when I respond by asking if they know how much we spend now. I understand. After all, education is the key to building a life of health, economic success, and happiness. For that matter, having an educated population benefits our state as much or more than it benefits individual students. I thought this might make a good topic for this week's column and hope you agree.

The best way to start this conversation is with a basic snapshot. According to information available on the Kentucky Department of Education website, 647,987 students were enrolled in one of the state's 173 public school districts during the 2019-2020 school year. There are 1,477 public schools, where children are taught and receive services delivered by 42,479 teachers, 46,455 classified staff, and 8,995 licensed bus drivers.

You can imagine that any mission of this size and scope comes with a hefty price tag, and spending on Kindergarten through 12th grade accounts for more than 42 percent of our current budget. Of course, that \$5 billion piece of the pie grows even larger when you include postsecondary, early childhood, and prekindergarten education. The \$12 billion budget we approved this session is slightly higher than last year's and maintains SEEK funding at the current level of \$4,000 per pupil. We also used this budget to invest in many areas of education, including:

- \$140 million towards the entire cost of full-day kindergarten
- \$1.05 million for the full SEEK employer match for new mental health professionals
- \$3 million in additional funds to support School for Deaf and School for Blind
- \$2.6 million for AP exams
- \$1 million more for Kentucky Adult Learner Pilot Program
- \$1 million in general fund monies for the Teacher Scholarship Program, which provides financial aid to Kentucky students pursuing teacher certification at participating Kentucky colleges
- \$800,000 for Dolly's Imagination Library (matched dollars)

I want to clarify that the term "SEEK" represents the foundation of education funding in Kentucky. SEEK stands for the Support Education Excellence in Kentucky (SEEK) formula and was implemented by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky in 1990. Under the Kentucky Education Reform Act

Capitol Focus



State Rep. Brandon Reed

(KERA) of 1990, local districts are required to levy a minimum of 30 cents per \$100 of assessed property through a combination of taxes to participate in the SEEK program. SEEK funds are distributed on a per-pupil basis and the amount generated locally is made equal with a state match to reach a guaranteed base. This formula means local districts with the wealth to generate more revenue receive fewer state dollars, while poorer districts with less capacity to generate revenue receive more from the state. Essentially, when we talk about SEEK, we are referring to the amount each district receives per pupil.

The budget we passed last month also includes \$1.15 billion for the Kentucky Teacher's Retirement System. This is approximately twice the statutorily-required amount and almost a tenth of our entire budget, but every dime is necessary to shore up the fund. In addition to meeting and exceeding our pension obligations, we also made provisions to pay the state portion of the retired teacher's health insurance program. Instead of allocating additional funds for retired teachers' health insurance, we authorized the program to use overpayments made this year and previous years. According to budget officials, these overpayments more than cover next year's costs.

In addition to state funding, our schools are also supported by local and federal tax dollars. According to the Kentucky Department of Education, overall education funding for preschool through 12th grade includes more than \$969 million in federal education revenue and \$2.9 billion in local taxes. This does not take into consideration the \$3.13 billion in federal money has been allocated specifically for public education spending in Kentucky by the federal government, nor does it include the \$127 million in federal COVID-relief funds that the legislature invested in the School Facilities Construction Commission to replace aging and inadequate school buildings. These federal dollars provide education leaders an opportunity and responsibility to address short-term needs associated with the pandemic and invest in the structural changes that should, over the long term, help Kentucky students reach their potential.

I also want to discuss a law the General Assembly passed

that is aimed at meeting the needs of individual children. This bill is HB 563. Under the terms of the new law, per pupil funding through the Support Education Excellence in Kentucky (SEEK) program would follow a student to all eligible public school districts. HB 563 also creates Education Opportunity Accounts (EOA) to provide parents of any eligible Kentucky child financial assistance towards a variety of educational supplies, including tutoring, testing, and technology. Account funds can also be used for tuition at all public schools as well as private schools in counties with 90,000 or more residents. Public education must be viewed from the lens of providing each child with the learning environment that best meets his or her needs.

I am sharing this information to provide perspective as we continue to look at how we can not only help our children recover from this pandemic, but also reach their full potential. This interim, the Education and Appropriations and Revenue committees will consider which issues we tackle during the 2022 Regular Session. Education funding will be among them but what we do with our money is just as important as how much money we have.

Until next session, I will use these legislative updates to share summaries of the legislation we passed this year. I can still be reached through the toll-free message line in Frankfort at 1-800-372-7181 or by email at Brandon.Reed@lrc.ky.gov. If you would like more information

about any of these bills or legislative actions, you can also visit legislature.ky.gov.

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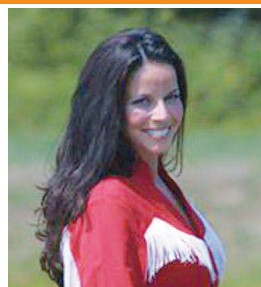
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