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The Times Journal

# OPINION

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## Legislation Brings Needed Balance To Governing Of Kentucky Schools

By Jim Waters



The state Senate should be lauded for making reforms to Kentucky's education system – specifically the way public schools are governed – a top legislative priority during this year's General Assembly session.

Senate Bill 1 builds on past improvements to bring even more sense and sanity to the relationship between School Based Decision-Making (SBDM) councils and those held accountable for districts, primarily superintendents and the locally elected boards who hire them.

Currently, school boards are the only ones accountable to taxpayers for their districts, but only SBDM councils have the power that matters when it comes to who gets hired, what they teach and how they spend the dollars to get the job done in their individual schools.

Parents, meanwhile, can get left out in the cold since current law requires the majority of council members to be school personnel, including the principals who chair the bodies.

The current SBDM model of school governance – a most bizarre and controversial creation of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990 – not only absolutely prohibits parents from having an equal number of seats on councils but also fails to provide a process by which they can appeal decisions more in the interests of teachers than

students.

Opponents of school choice in general and SBDM reforms in particular often feign concern about a lack of parental involvement in our education system while supporting policies that discourage increased engagement.

Claiming parents need to be more involved but denying them alternatives if their children are trapped in failing schools doesn't indicate a real desire for more parental involvement.

Neither does denying parents at least an equal voice to school staff on SBDM councils.

Parental lack of enthusiasm for this policy is noticed both anecdotally – there have been numerous complaints about schools having difficulty finding parents to serve on SBDM councils – and empirically in extremely low turnout for the elections which decide councils' parental representatives.

Kentucky Department of Education data indicate that votes cast for recent SBDM elections numbered less than 10% of school enrollment in nearly three-fourths of the 1,141 public schools reporting voting data and less than 1% in 186 of those schools.

Truth be told, some of the crankiest voices opposing SBDM reforms seem to despise parental involvement.

Lexington Herald-Leader columnist Linda Blackford smears parents engaged in reforming the SBDM system as “the pitchfork crowd” and as “angry, deluded citizens [who] are suddenly flooding school board meetings to squawk about critical race theory and that their children might learn about Martin Luther King, Jr.”

That's a curious charge considering

Kentucky's new social studies standards don't even mention King or many of the other great civil rights leaders.

It's the state's curriculum standards, not “squawking” parents, which increase the odds that our students won't know about him or his leadership in helping our nation make great strides in dealing with racial equality – developments Blackford and her teachers' union comrades rarely, if ever, mention.

As the House now considers SB 1, here are some relevant questions for representatives to ponder:

Has Kentucky's SBDM policy – a model no other state will touch – contributed to KERA's vision of dramatically improving Kentucky's education system?

If SBDM policy is such an asset, why do two out of three fourth grade Kentucky public school students, including 86% of Black children, fail to read proficiently?

If policies aren't producing demonstrably better education outcomes, why does our state continue to force them upon the citizenry?

If there are different policies which have proven to help especially at-risk students in other states – like offering parents the opportunity to engage in a way that really matters, including choosing where and how their children are educated – why would we prefer a failed policy like SBDM, which no other states subscribes to, over a successful one like school choice, which most other states offer?

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](http://www.bipps.org). He can be reached at [jwaters@freedomkentucky.com](mailto:jwaters@freedomkentucky.com) and [@bipps](https://twitter.com/bipps) on Twitter.

## Western Kentucky Gets Disaster Relief, Important Literacy Bill Introduced

By Sarah Durand

This week's session focused heavily on providing financial assistance related to the December 2021 tornadoes which ravaged parts of our commonwealth, destroying entire communities. Covid's continuing impact on education – and executive powers – policy, reading instruction and budget maneuvering round out this week's legislative update.

### DISASTER RELIEF

Both chambers passed disaster relief legislation to extend the severe weather state of emergency through April 15, 2022 along with bills to provide \$200 million in disaster relief funding for immediate needs such as temporary housing for those affected by the storms and education assistance for the children of those communities.

### HOW KY TEACHES READING

Also of note was the introduction of Senate Bill 9 that would change the way teachers are instructed to teach reading, a prospect we've spent many years educating legislators on; it's the subject of our most recent Policy Point. SB9 passed out of committee and is set for a full Senate vote on Tuesday when lawmakers return to Frankfort.

### LEGISLATURE STEPS UP, FILES BUDGET EARLY

House leaders broke tradition by filing their biennial budget bill during the first week of this year's legislative session. The House's move came nearly an entire week before Gov. Andy Beshear delivered his budget address to a joint gathering of the Kentucky General Assembly at the Capitol in Frankfort on Wednesday night. Read the Bluegrass Institute's initial analysis of the House's proposed spending plan here.

Along with criticizing the unprecedented timing of their budget filing, the governor's office and progressive groups bemoaned the continuing commitment of House leaders for their fiscally conservative approach, particularly when it comes to their proposal's careful decisions about the allocation of a hefty amount of surplus and one-time federal dollars.

Regarding the decision to release the House plan ahead of the governor's proposal, Speaker David Osborne, R-Prospect, rightly said he thought it would be “a waste of time” to “wait intentionally” after months of work by the body's budget subcommittee and the need to get tornado relief funding to the governor's desk.

The commonwealth's Consensus Forecasting Group predicts a \$2 billion surplus for the current fiscal year ending June 30, 2022, on top of \$1.1 billion in excess revenues for the previous fiscal year. Kentucky also is slated to receive \$1.1 billion in American Rescue Plan Act funds in May.

The House version includes increased spending in education and pay hikes for several groups, including state and social workers, educators and Kentucky State Police personnel and troopers – raises that Beshear had previously indicated would also be part of his spending plan.

It appears the House's plan allows for maintaining a healthy rainy day fund balance, which was praised by Bluegrass Institute Policy Fellow Andrew McNeill in a tweet as “real progress in building a legitimate budget reserve after decades of neglecting the need to save for cyclical revenue.”

The Bluegrass Institute in the past has criticized legislative leaders for wasting too much time during the early parts of budget sessions. We applaud Speaker Osborne and his leadership team changing meaningless and time-wasting traditions and getting a proposal released that both rank-and-file legislators and citizens have ample time to consider before a vote is taken.

As Osborne said, “the governor's recommendations are exactly that – they are recommendations.” Besides, it's the legislature which carries the constitutional responsibility for passing a biennial budget.

The legislative update is comprised by Sarah May Durand, director of government affairs for the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions. She can be reached at [sarahmaydurand@freedomkentucky.com](mailto:sarahmaydurand@freedomkentucky.com).

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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