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OPINION

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Problems in Kentucky schools: Report focuses on Newport but relevant statewide

By John Garen, Ph.D.

While a recent report on the Newport Independent School District focuses on one Northern Kentucky community, it certainly has relevance for the entire commonwealth.

The report illustrates the many problems endemic to a large, public bureaucracy that many school systems have become: poor performance, demoralized employees and costing a lot of money.

This is shown clearly by the report assessing the Newport Independent Schools. Its students perform very poorly when it comes to basic reading and math skills. There's a great deal of teacher dissatisfaction and turnover. Administrative spending is high. Yet Newport has one of the highest funding levels of any district in the state at over \$20,000 per pupil.

Sadly, this pattern of poor performance and high cost is repeated often in many Kentucky public schools, leading to a long-term statewide stagnation in overall student performance while per-pupil funding has almost continuously risen. (See my paper "Facts and Trends Regarding Performance and Funding of K-12 in Kentucky," December 2020.

The Newport report calls for sweeping changes to raise the culture and performance of the schools. It recommends, for example, raising academic standards, retaining and recruiting good teachers, developing school leaders to implement changes and improving accountability.

All are sensible recommendations and all apply to many Kentucky school districts. But a key to attaining them is assuring that the system doesn't keep funding school failures; rather it should fund school success. This is the essence of accountability.

Reformers frequently rely entirely on political accountability for change, i.e., political pressure on state and local governmental organizations. While this is worthwhile, too much reliance on political "solutions" to problems in public schools has led to the current disappointing results.

A far superior form of accountability is embedded in the demands of the marketplace: poorly performing organizations lose their clients and their revenue. Applying this to schools means:

Funding "follows" the student, and the family chooses the school the child attends. An important companion policy is

encouraging the opening of new schools so that parents have a wider range of schools to choose from.

Poorly performing schools lose students (and revenue) to the better performing schools; more of the latter can open and the former must reform or close.

Schools are held accountable (and incentivized) for good performance.

Good performance requires practices recommended by the report, including recruiting/retaining better teachers, high standards, a healthy school culture and good leadership.

The best way to attain market-like accountability is through the adoption of education savings accounts or vouchers, where each family is awarded funds to be spent on their children's schooling, whether public or private. Another good option is a healthy set of independent and innovative public charter schools which parents may choose.

In this setting, there's little reliance on parents having to "play politics" by schmoozing school officials to gain the type of schooling they want for their children. Instead, if their child is suffering in an ill-suited or poorly

performing school, they simply move them.

Some commentators claim parents cannot be trusted to make good schooling decisions for their kids, especially low-income and poorly-educated parents. I dispute that claim. The top-performing charter schools in New York City have tens of thousands of applicants for whom there's no space. These applicants are from the low-income, low-education demographic noted above, but they know which schools are best for their kids.

It's noteworthy that every school district in Kentucky could embrace more choice for parents and encourage education innovation by allowing a wide set of charter schools to open in their districts. Sadly, I doubt many districts will do so.

It looks like it will take state government action to establish a voucher-like option or a broader charter school program to accomplish more choice, accountability and better-performing schools.

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GET YOUR HEALTH SCREENINGS

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Go to our website to see "Preventive Screenings and Immunizations" <https://www.lcdhd.org/info-tools/preventive-screenings-and-immunizations/>.

Use this link to see what preventive screenings are recommended for your age and gender. While this is not a comprehensive list, these screenings are among the most important. Also listed are needed immunizations. The primary benefits of immunizations are to prevent disease. Immunization is considered one of the greatest public health achievements of the 20th century, and experts agree that immunization is the key to staying healthy.

It is important to note that Kentucky is one of the unhealthiest states in our nation; but, a few healthy lifestyle choices could change this. First, eating normally proportioned helpings of nutritious foods including at least five fruits and vegetables a day can lower weight and reduce heart disease and diabetes. Second, exercising about 30 minutes per day can lower blood pressure. Third, avoiding the use of tobacco products can reduce several types of cancer. Finally, making sure you get your needed preventive screenings can detect diseases early and greatly increase your chances for a positive health outcomes, while receiving your recommended vaccinations can prevent acquiring disease in the first place. Visit our website at www.LCDHD.org and click the "52 Weeks to Health" banner to learn more about each of these areas.

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