

Kentucky can lead and innovate, not just follow

KERA'S LACK OF VISION WASTED TIME, MONEY, STUDENTS

By Nina McCoy

In 1990, Kentucky was given a gift of a court ruling that demanded a change in the educational system. With this ruling came tax dollars



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and the Kentucky Education Reform Act, which promised to equalize the opportunity for an education among all of Kentucky's 120 counties and 173 school districts.

Unfortunately that opportunity was squandered by lack of focused vision.

It seemed that someone grabbed a catalog of all 1990 education reform ideas and ordered one of each, which ended up throwing ungraded primary,

math and writing portfolios, performance tasks, open-response tests, outcome-based education, school councils, etc. at an unsuspecting and unprepared system.

Most of the ideas had already been proven ineffective and many were proving impossible, but any discussion of that was squelched by principals who announced in professional development that teachers had better be ready to change or they had better be ready to retire.

Twenty four years later, I'm still here and I still believe that Kentucky has the ability to create a legacy for our children as an innovator, instead of an imitator of educational reform.

The premise for an educational system should be to foster independent individuals who can serve in and benefit from a balanced society. Like cells that are differentiated for a specific function within a multi-cellular organism, each person plays a role within a healthy community with a sense of dignity and true purpose.

An education should allow each person to develop their natural abili-

ties to work as a vital member of a community, even outside the golden triangle.

Kentucky's current system is a haphazard attempt to prepare every student for a liberal arts college and a career in one of the three acceptable industries left within the boundaries of the USA — medical, legal and engineering.

Anyone who is not ready to heal, legislate or design is then relegated to become a pawn in a game they don't know exists. We are not developing the middle-class ideals of entrepreneurship, artisanship and craftsmanship. And most cruelly we do not teach students of the availability or the inevitability of "menial" jobs.

Every Kentucky teenager is required to take Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II — no matter what their goals in life or what their abilities. Each and every one will be tested with an ACT-made end of course exam in Algebra II, Biology and U.S. History. Finally, in their junior year every student will take an ACT test to determine their likelihood of succeeding in a liberal-arts college.

Imagine the teenager who has no inclination of going to college but wants to work or prepare for trade school. By this time they have either stopped paying attention to any of this nonsense or they have been devastated by their inability to fit the mold. Either way, we have failed them and they have one year to figure out the rest.

All too rare is the opportunity to learn what it means to be in business, work a trade or develop a skill that they can offer to others — such as fixing a roof, plumbing a house, running electricity or repairing an appliance.

This problem is not on the radar because anyone who has a say in this game has children who will be going to that liberal-arts college or directly into the family business.

High schools that exist in areas where the families don't have the money, status or background to affect change end up being called "drop-out factories," and teachers who dare to point out the obvious individual differences in students are dismissed with the order to "differentiate instruction."

Before labeling any more high schools as "drop out factories" and before deciding the particulars of education reform, perhaps

the best warning comes from ACT's own national study, "The Forgotten Middle," which states in its conclusion: "This research shows that, under current conditions, the level of academic achievement that students attain by eighth grade has a larger impact on their college and career readiness by the time they graduate high school than anything that happens in high school."

This is Kentucky's chance to do what we have unfairly asked the teachers to do — differentiate instruction.

Instead of trying to create slaves for a corporate system, real reform should structure the educational system to allow for different learning styles, intelligence types and talents of the students, not just pretend that a good teacher can accomplish this in a class of 30 souls armed with only a college-preparatory curriculum.