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Kentucky madness: neglecting education

FUNDING CUTS MAKE NO SENSE FOR STRUGGLING STATE

By Robert F. Sexton

Neglecting education is Kentucky's home-grown March Madness.

The new budget and revenue package speeds us down a road we don't need to be on -- one that leads to education neglect. Shortchanging education won't create jobs, and a budget that will be short by about \$500 million next year isn't fiscally responsible.

Last month, Kentucky got generally high marks from Governing Magazine in its annual evaluation of state government management, but the publication also noted that political leadership has brought things to a "standstill unparalleled in Kentucky history. ... It's remarkable what a mess has been created."

A little of this mess was just cleaned up when the legislature followed a judge's order and passed a budget. There was no requirement that it be a good budget, however, and I doubt if this one will move Kentucky forward.

For years, Kentucky has been going in reverse in education. This budget does nothing to change that direction. Indeed, the worst will come next fall -- just a few months away -- when the governor and legislature must figure out how to cover almost \$500 million they've borrowed to meet this year's spending commitments and increased debt service.

And the next budget must also face declining state revenues resulting from just-passed tax changes. Starting year after next, the results become "revenue negative" not "revenue neutral," as state income is predicted to decline.

But the challenge is now bigger than it was a few months ago. The public perception will be that lawmakers addressed the revenue problem when, in fact, they did not. Given that, it will take many years before it's politically feasible to talk seriously about tax reform again.

That's just the way it works in Frankfort. It takes a lot of time for voters to get over a perceived increase. (And even though this tax package will be revenue negative, some people's taxes actually went up -- among them smokers', cable users', beer drinkers'.)

And it isn't easy to explain the problems with Kentucky's investment in education when education funding actually went up a little in this year's

budget. But a small step forward can't make up for many steps backward.

The problem is that the state's total revenue, which includes the education portion, is woefully inadequate and has been for many years. There just isn't enough money coming in to cover basic services.

The slide in education investment, which started in the mid-1990s, results in a drop compared to the rest of the nation and to the states around us.

In education investments on a per-pupil basis, Kentucky ranks 38th in the nation -- not far from where we were in the 1980s. Kentucky invests \$1,200 less per student than the average state. If we invested at the average level, our education spending would be \$746 million more than it is.

Compared to states surrounding us, we rank seventh out of eight, (Tennessee is at the bottom.) Kentucky invests \$1,200 per student less than Indiana and \$1,300 less than West Virginia.

Are our kids worth less? Are they easier or less expensive to teach than kids in West Virginia and Indiana? Not by a long shot.

I hear from many business friends that education should be more efficient in its spending. Kentucky schools do look pretty efficient when you compare our low investment to our improved academic results. For instance, a recent study of high school graduation and college preparation by the Manhattan Institute, a free-market think tank, ranks Kentucky higher than all but a handful of northeastern states in the "college readiness" of its students.

The institute also ranked Kentucky as the fourth highest state on its "school efficiency index" last year. We're still not where we want to be, but we're better than some people think we are in comparison to many other states.

Educational gains cannot continue without bold innovations, continuous school improvement and adequate investment. The new budget fails on all counts.

One obvious example of harm from our backward investment approach is technology. Our schools' computers are "dying of old age," writes the Kentucky School Boards Association, leading to a "crop of students who won't have the skills to compete in a modern economy."

After a big early investment that put us second in the nation in technology infrastructure, our ranking has dropped to 48th, and "soon we'll be last," say education officials.

Other examples abound. Rewards for high-performing schools. Gone. Regional help for school improvement. Gone. Teacher training. Cut. Vocational education, minority recruitment, support for school councils,

gifted-and-talented education, writing programs, teaching for students who need extra time, textbooks. All cut.

Overall, Kentucky's education investments have not even kept up with inflation. But Kentuckians' aspirations for their children, for economic growth and for first-rate schools haven't diminished. Failure to invest in what's needed to get that improvement guarantees failure in meeting these goals.

Madness is often defined as doing the same thing over and over and getting the same bad results. This is what we've done. It's time to stop.

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