

Gains squandered, Kentucky again is dead last in education support

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The 2001 General Assembly was the first to be dominated by an elected majority of state Senate Republicans. GOP leaders, especially Senate President David Williams, were jubilant.

The Goo Goos, or "good government" advocates, also had something to cheer: Their push for annual legislative sessions, which I foolishly supported, had just been approved.

In 2003, voters unhappy with Democrat Paul Patton's personal conduct and his pardon of political buddies, gave the governor's office to Republican Ernie Fletcher, who promised to clean up Frankfort and make economic progress.

Government by Democrats was a joke, the Fletcher campaign said. One hilarious TV ad likened Attorney General Ben Chandler to a hapless dog, repeatedly failing to jump a picket fence. The voice-over warned, "Nothing is going to change until these people of the past are gone. Ernie Fletcher will bring real change to Frankfort."

So with Republicans in charge and the legislature meeting more often, things have got better, right?

Wrong.

Kentucky has fallen to dead last in support for elementary and secondary education, according to the annual rankings in *Governing* magazine's Source Book.

Yes, dead last, based on education spending as a percentage of per capita personal income.

Dead last in effort for our kids.

Economic momentum? Between 2002 and 2005, Kentucky dropped six places in the standings, from 37th to 43rd.

We rank much higher when it comes to debt. We now have the seventh highest per capita state and local government debt in the country; as a percentage of government revenue, we're second.

You may think our road program is underfunded, our highway infrastructure deteriorating and big projects like the Ohio River bridges in danger of languishing for lack of funds. And you would be right, even though Kentucky ranks 14th in government spending for roads, as a percent of personal income.

That's what it looks like when "no net new revenue" becomes the first principle of governance -- when leadership is abandoned in favor of a shabby appeal to the lowest common denominator -- when the only promise candidates care to keep is the "no new tax" pledge.

Fletcher signed one of those pledges, and bragged about it in his campaign. For the moment, he's keeping his word, taking the rest of us along for the ride.

The sensation is something like being in the back seat of a car when a tractor-trailer jackknifes in front and your driver says, "Don't worry. I'll keep us on the road."

Not to worry? The Fletcher tax reforms will grow us out of this problem?

Wrong again.

While state revenues improved this year all across the country, don't expect that positive trend to continue here.

Economists in Kentucky's Consensus Forecasting Group -- non-partisan experts whose job it is to predict such things -- expect state revenue growth of only 1.9 percent in fiscal 2007 and 3.5 percent in fiscal 2008.

What's growing, relentlessly, is the list of unmet needs at all levels of education, in health care, in social services. And, with annual sessions, lawmakers will have many more opportunities to tell voters only what they want to hear and do nothing about it.

It looks like the worst of both possible worlds. The prediction that Fletcher's tax plan will produce \$250 million more than expected this year places his "revenue neutral" claim somewhere between outright lie and serious miscalculation. At the same time, this badly needed expansion of revenue will tail off when it's even more badly needed.

That ought to scare everybody who cares about state government's role in meeting basic human needs and financing a better future for the next generation

of Kentuckians. Instead, the big fear apparently is that somebody might do the responsible thing and try to raise the revenue that progress requires.

Instead of thoughtfully debating what it will take to finance a better future, we sit around arguing about something that's absolutely beside the point: whether the University of Louisville should be first or third on the University of Kentucky's football schedule. Who cares?