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Spreading the word about test scores key for realistic expectations

by Dave Adkisson

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Kentucky's business community is getting some positive feedback for its role in helping prepare the state for the release of the first test scores on its tougher academic standards. The experience provides an important lesson about the importance of clear communication and realistic expectations.

Paducah, in fact, was the location of the first presentation that Kentucky Education Commissioner Terry Holliday and I made to business leaders at the Paducah Chamber's Power in Partnership Breakfast — in addition to a conversation with The Paducah Sun — about the harder work that began in schools in the fall of 2011. We've made 13 joint appearances across the state since then, along with other efforts that are detailed below.

Our message: Kentucky students are being taught math and English/language arts under new, more challenging standards that are designed to improve their preparation for college and career. The standards are benchmarked internationally to better prepare students to succeed in a global economy and, because they are more rigorous, test scores are likely to show a decline. When that happens, it is critical that Kentucky stay the course with the new standards to help our students — and our state — succeed in the long run.

The first round of tests came last spring, and the results were released early in the 2012-2013 school year. As predicted, fewer schools were ranked as proficient, and more fell into the "needs improvement" category. Some parents were surprised when their children's scores declined although, since this was the first year of testing under a new system, it was difficult to compare the latest scores with those from previous years.

On the positive side, the results showed slightly more than 47 percent of public high school students were prepared for college and/or careers, according to the Kentucky Department of Education. That's a nine-point increase from the 2010-11 school year — a significant improvement, especially in light of the fact that the new standards are designed to improve college/career readiness.

Without question, the system and the test scores present a complicated landscape for parents, advocates, business leaders and others to navigate as we try to determine where our schools are and where they should be going. But it is encouraging that, so far, there has been little in the way of push-back from folks who want Kentucky to return to the old system when scores were higher and many schools and students appeared to be performing better.

There are many reasons for this reaction. School districts prepared parents by sending informational materials home with students prior to the release of the scores. State education officials made the point time and again that this would be a starting point for schools to use in measuring future progress. And the business

community joined with education advocates in reaching out at the community and state level with a message about the importance of sustaining high expectations.

Among other things, the Kentucky Chamber ...

- n Produced a video sharing employers' perspective about the role of the tougher standards in preparing a high-quality workforce.

- n Sent employers information about ways they could communicate with their employees and communities about the topic (you can find the video and employer kit on our website, kychamber.com).

- n Developed materials to deliver the message in terms that were as understandable as possible (education, like many professions, seems to have its own language that can quickly get "in the weeds" and confuse a lay listener).

- n Worked with the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence and other advocates to target business leaders with key messages.

The drumbeat was clear and consistent, and we hope it made a positive difference. Now, of course, is no time to rest, and we plan to continue delivering the message in the weeks and months ahead: Kentucky must stay on course with the higher expectations and harder work that will ensure the success of individuals, communities and the entire Commonwealth.

Dave Adkisson is president of the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce.

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