

Jefferson delegation chief scolds GOP's Williams

Kentucky Senate President and Republican gubernatorial nominee David Williams has lately spent a great deal of time pillorying the Jefferson County school board, apparently in an attempt to curry favor with Jefferson County voters dissatisfied with the state of the schools and actions of the board on a host of issues.

As surprising as this may sound, I can imagine that on some issues, in certain respects, I might agree with Williams. But that conversation is for another place and time. That said, I cannot agree that we should simply dissolve the existing elected board and replace it with mayoral appointees approved by the Metro Council.

More to the point, how is it that David Williams, from Burkesville, Ky., some 130 miles from Louisville, has a better idea about what is wrong with the Jefferson

County schools and how to fix them than do the 500,000 registered voters in Metro Louisville? Let's come back to that one a little later.

Mark Twain said there are lies, damn lies and statistics. It surprises no one to suggest that statistics can be used to lead responsibly or to mislead irresponsibly. Williams laments the pernicious effect that low-achieving schools have on the commonwealth, fretting that economic development in Kentucky lags because Jefferson County has "60 percent of the worst schools ... in the state." Let's look at that statistic.

In 2009, there were 10 Kentucky public schools identified as "persistently low achieving," six of them in Jefferson County. In 2010 there were 11 Kentucky public schools similarly defined, seven of them in Jefferson County. That's in the neighborhood of 60 percent. So Williams must be correct that

economic development in Kentucky lags because of those seven schools. Well, like Coach Lee Corso says on ESPN every Saturday during football season — not so fast, my friend.

There are 133 schools in Jefferson County, and that doesn't even count special schools like Head Start, alternative and vocational schools. Six schools is less than 5 percent of the county's total. So that 5 percent of one county's total is the anvil that holds down an entire state's progress? Please.

Other statistics (there's that word again) demonstrate a different picture. For instance, when ACT scores are ranked for 2010, three schools in the top 10 are in Jefferson County. Does the board deserve any credit for the bright students its schools produce to offset less-than-stellar performance in other areas?

No schools in Cumberland, Clinton, McCreary,

Monroe, Wayne or Whitley counties (those comprising Williams' Senate district) were ranked in the top 10 in ACT scores for 2010. Does that mean the boards in those counties deserve replacing?

In 2010, Jefferson County's average daily attendance was 84,862. The six counties in Williams' district combined to average around 2,000 in ADA. I would not presume to tell rural school boards overseeing relatively small districts how to run their schools when my experience and sensibilities leave me better suited to deal with the idiosyncrasies unique to larger, more urban districts. It isn't too much to ask that Williams give the Jefferson County board similar deference.

Jefferson County is represented in the legislature by six senators and 17 representatives, all of whom have better than a working knowledge of the challenges facing our school system. I do not sub-

scribe to the notion that improving the Jefferson County school board requires a Frankfort solution proposed by a Cumberland County senator. It is an affront to me and my Jefferson delegation colleagues to suggest that we who know our own school system best do not deserve the deference that Williams would expect were the shoe on the other foot.

And, in any case, we have ways to change membership on the school board and, presumably, its direction. They're called elections.

None of this is meant to diminish the importance of improving those schools in Jefferson County that need improvement, and indeed improving schools across the commonwealth. The community I represent rightly sees public education as its best path to prosperity, and I am confident that every member of the Jefferson County school board accept-

ed the task of their service sharing that same belief. Williams adds nothing meaningful to our public conversation over how to improve education by using Jefferson County's schools — and its schoolchildren — as political pawns.

Williams is truly a unique figure in Kentucky's political world and, more pointedly, on one of the signature issues in the commonwealth over the past 21 years — he is a Republican who voted for the Kentucky Education Reform Act and the revenue to fund it. There was a time when he obviously knew how important all of this is. This latest scheme suggests he has forgotten all that.

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