

# Kentucky's new school ratings are racism masquerading as reform



## Your Turn

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Guest columnist

There is nothing bright about Kentucky's new five-star school rating system.

This "system of accountability" immediately impugned itself when Courier Journal reporter Mandy McLaren reported there were dozens of five-star Kentucky schools that posted significant "achievement gaps," including my alma mater, duPont Manual High School.

Maybe I should celebrate graduating from that "prestigious" and "proficient" predominantly white institution as a "minority" and be thankful for even having the privilege of attending this five-star high school. After all, I come from neighborhoods that heavily populate Jefferson County's one-star schools, so I should perhaps be proud of "beating those odds."

But I'm not.

I've decided to drop the racist idea that I'm an extraordinary product of a disadvantaged or "inferior" environment.

And Kentucky should drop this racist, elitist policy of a school rating system that validates an existing idea of a school hierarchy, which is justified by the racist idea of an academic achievement gap.

State Education Commissioner Wayne Lewis argues that Kentucky's new ranking system is designed to increase transparency and hold schools accountable for "student performance" — meaning achievement.

In doing so, he blames "underperforming" and underfunded schools, students, parents and teachers for not meeting the standards or expectations of distinguished and proficient elite, wealthy and predominantly white school communities.

In line with the federal 2003 No Child Left Behind Act and the 2018 Every Student Succeeds Act, Lewis' main focus is the reduction of disparities between the performance, or academic excellence, of student groups — closing achievement gaps.

Arguing against the racist idea that "black children cannot learn," Lewis looks to penalize underfunded, non-selective public schools for failing to have their kids display the intellectual strength of their white and wealthy peers through state-required standardized tests and other invalid numerical measures of achievement.

Lewis expects these schools to then "do better" at promoting higher levels of achievement and to build a culture of high expectations among the low-performing student groups. Their support? The state would help them implement research-based strategies.

But by focusing on performance or academic disparities — and thus validating 20th-century segregationist beliefs that intelligence and academic achievement can be standardized and measurable to prove differences in racial intelligence — Lewis and our state's education system reinforce the racist idea that since white students are the top-performing racial group, their educational institutions, curriculum, leaders, teachers and students are "better" and deserving of the hoard of public and private resources they hold.

They also reinforce the elitist idea that since selective schools, not "reside schools," perform better on standardized tests, they are deserving of better resources — such as more Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

When you have high schools like the Academy @

Shawnee offering only nine AP courses, compared to Eastern's 22 or Ballard's 30, that's the true gap. Especially if you consider that the demographic makeup of these "advanced" students and "better" schools is predominantly white and of higher socioeconomic status.

When high-poverty, majority minority schools are more likely to hire teachers with less than two years of experience, more likely to have higher suspension rates and more likely to have outdated infrastructure and technology — that's the true gap.

To believe in an academic achievement gap is to believe in academically "inferior" or "disadvantaged" students and families, and not an unjust testing or admissions process that inequitably distributes access to opportunities and resources.

If we saw the education system's top priority as not the reduction of disparities between the standardized performance of student groups, but instead the reduction of the disparities in the funding and allocation of resources between student groups, we could achieve true equity by standardizing access to vital education resources regardless of income, race or disability.

Lewis and other state officials argue that the "star system is not designed to rank Kentucky's schools from best to worst, but it is used to classify schools to show which are excelling and which need improvement."

However, Lewis implied that schools in Kentucky that scored three stars signaled "at the very least they were pretty good schools."

With that mindset, students and parents will begin to believe, if they don't already, that the low-poverty, predominantly white schools with five stars are the "best" schools, and one-star schools like Louisville's historically black Central High School, or majority black Academy @ Shawnee are "bad," or perhaps "inferior" schools.

"Gifted and talented" minority students like me and schools that show exceptional progress like three-star Cochran Elementary — the high-poverty (or underfunded) school that rebounded after being deemed among the worst in the state in 2018 — aren't excuses to not adequately and equitably fund all schools.

And they shouldn't be used to validate the invalid standards of intelligence and achievement we see in state standardized testing.

There isn't an "academic achievement gap" that can be solved with individual responsibility, equal access to testing resources or forced busing. But instead, there's an "opportunity gap" and "funding gap," where certain student groups are underfunded, highly disciplined and tested with bias to justify the inequitable amount of resources and opportunities benefited to those who "perform better."

If we truly want change in our broken education system, we need more than racism masquerading as reform. We need justice and accountability — not from individual schools, but from politicians and bureaucrats who choose consistently money and self-interest over the livelihood of students and teachers. Don't be afraid to speak out. And if you can, vote on Nov. 5. That's a step toward accountability.

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