

Teachers don't deserve blame

By Brent McKim
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I recently watched The Courier-Journal interview with Kentucky Commissioner of Education Dr. Terry Holliday, and I felt it would be helpful to share some information related to our JCPS priority schools.

Improving student success is a core mission of the Jefferson County Teachers Association (JCTA). As teachers, we chose our profession in order to make a difference for children.



We believe every student in our Jefferson County Public Schools deserves to go to a great school where success for all is the norm, and we clearly have far to go to realize this vision for all our learners, particularly in our priority schools.

Many factors impact student learning. Effective teaching is a key in-school factor and our teachers are absolutely and truly determined to keep exploring strategies that hold promise for helping all students succeed. And JCTA is strongly committed to helping our members achieve this goal of success for every child.

Dr. Holliday suggested enhanced compensation and expanded instructional time at priority schools might be helpful. JCTA has consistently indicated we are open to these concepts at our priority schools. Indeed, JCTA has shown leadership in collaboratively developing many proactive agreements with the district to accommodate the needs of our schools. However, despite efforts by JCTA and our members in priority schools to discuss these and other potentially promising improvement strategies, little meaningful dialogue has occurred.

When discussing priority schools, I frequently encounter citizens that believe our contract "is the problem." I always ask these individuals if they are aware that each school site can vote to modify our contract to meet its needs and that this happens in dozens of buildings, if not hundreds, every year. For example, teachers at many schools have chosen to repurpose their planning time for professional development, professional learning communities, and student interventions. At JCTA, we are proud of this empowerment of educators to make changes necessary to improve student success; however, I have yet to meet anyone in our community who is aware of the flexibility that schools have within our labor agreement.

Commissioner Holliday also discussed staffing our priority schools.

Fourteen of our 18 priority schools chose the restaffing model from among the four state-mandated options. In this model every teacher in the building was overstaffed and had to interview with the principal in order to return to the building. The principals asked every teacher if they would commit to the efforts that would be needed as part of their school's improvement plan. In this process the principals were required by the state-mandated restaffing model to start the next school year with a staff that included at least 50 percent of the teachers who were new to the building.

It is very important to understand that the 50 percent new teacher requirement was a minimum. The maximum could have been 100 percent. In other words, these principals did not have to accept ANY teachers back into the building unless the principal felt the teacher was committed and well-suited to help the school improve.

JCTA even negotiated an agreement with JCPS to extend this screening authority for priority school principals for as long as these schools remain in priority school status. This means that these principals continue to screen all candidates wishing to work in their buildings. Principals do not have to accept any teacher if they believe better candidates are available. Therefore, every teacher in our persistently low-achieving schools has committed to the work being done there. As I visit our priority schools, this commitment is clearly visible. I see teachers going above and beyond, willingly, every single day.

The commissioner also discussed teacher effectiveness. In this regard, JCTA initiated a partnership with JCPS three years ago to design a new comprehensive teacher effectiveness system that will promote and support continuous improvement of all teachers in JCPS. We are now engaged in this collaborative work through a joint design committee consisting of five teachers and five administrators. We believe this work has the potential to make a greater difference in teacher effectiveness than any other single effort undertaken in JCPS in the past 25 years.

I cannot close without saying that we are very disturbed by Dr. Holliday's characterization of our teachers' work as "academic genocide." This implies intent to harm. This implication is blatantly false and offensive to both teacher and students in our priority schools.

These teachers are working to keep all students moving forward, in schools where up to 40 percent of their students miss at least one month of school each year.

These teachers are struggling, often with very limited success, to engage parents by holding meetings in neighborhoods where families live, offering free food paid for out of their own pockets, and working through their schools to offer transportation for parents to attend meetings and conferences. In short, the teachers in our priority schools are working their hearts out to help kids succeed every single day.

They may not have all the answers for how to reach every learner, but they never stop trying, and those with whom I have spoken took Dr. Holliday's comments very personally. They felt like they were being accused of intentionally not doing the right thing for kids, or even intentionally trying to do harm. I can't begin to tell you how disturbing and demoralizing this has been for the teachers and the students in these schools, who are the most in need of support.

Dr. Holliday may have been trying to get the community's attention by using such a shocking phrase, but many of those teaching and learning in these schools feel like they have been slapped in the face in order for the commissioner to do so.

Brent McKim is president of the Jefferson County Teachers Association.