

Higher standards, innovative programs benefiting students

Finally, there's good news on the education front and promises of more to come.

Last year, Kentucky's high school graduation rate soared to 86 percent, an increase of 7 percentage points from the 2011-12 school year. That rate is among the best in the country.

Not only did a greater percentage of high school seniors graduate last spring, but more of them were ready for the academic rigors of college.

Preliminary testing data from the 2012-13 school year show that 54 percent of the graduates were ready for college. That's a whopping improvement of 20 percentage points from 2010.

Some might question the excitement of having just over half of graduates being college ready, but it sure is a lot better than the 2010, when only a third of the graduating class was deemed ready.

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The preliminary results of last year's tests were revealed by Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear and Education Commissioner Terry Holliday. Individual schools and districts won't find out until next week about how they did on graduation rates and college and career readiness, but it was encouraging that Beshear and Holliday chose to release the statewide rates this week because the

numbers were so impressive.

Holliday declined to cite specific numbers for Jefferson County Public Schools. He did say that he was so impressed with advances made by some JCPS schools that he will be in Louisville on Sept. 27 for a news conference with Superintendent Donna Hargens.

Although the numbers show a dramatic one-year increase, the improvement in Kentucky's schools has been many years in the making. Beshear and Holliday credit the implementation of Senate Bill 1 in 2009 as a major impetus for the dramatic improvement.

That bill established more rigorous standards, created a balanced assessment system, aligned assessments and demanded more support for educators to implement the new system.

"Across the country, educators are rushing to prepare their students to meet the complex and constantly evolving demands of the new global economy," Holliday said. "I'm proud that we are on the forefront of that effort here in Kentucky, but I am most excited about what it means for our students."

It's nice to see a smiling, happy Holliday. It sure beats the scowling version that had harsh words last year about the lack of progress in some of Louisville's lowest-performing schools.

Holliday took a lot of heat for the intensity of his criticisms. Yet his don't-give-me-any-excuses-for-why-we-can't-do-better attitude and his passion to see more students achieve has helped raise the bar on education in Kentucky.

Although the test results are promising, everyone must realize this is only the beginning of a long process. It will be more difficult to increase graduation rates and college readiness for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Holliday recently praised a new program at 18 of the lowest performing JCPS schools that targets students who need extra help. More than 5,000 students will be eligible to get two hours of tutoring and support after regular school hours on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.

This is the kind of common-sense approach that has been a hallmark of Hargens' administration. She realizes that overall student achievement will not improve without a focus on the needs of individual students — particularly those who might not have the greatest support system outside of school.

The JCPS board deserves credit for signing off on this \$5 million project, which also includes transportation and an extra meal for the participants. After the test scores come in next week, struggling students from other JCPS schools will be offered the same extended-learning opportunities.

Improving student achievement is no easy task. But recent statewide and local initiatives have proved that innovative approaches and increased expectations can make a difference. |