

The Oldham Era

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OPINION

Question school system like any other taxpayer-funded entity

To the editor:

Oldham County residents are proud of the school system for good reason. It consistently ranks among the top performing county public school systems in the state based upon norm-reference tests to include the ACT, and criterion-referenced tests i.e. the Commonwealth Accountability Tests. There are superb teachers and administrators throughout the system. Children excel and many attend top-tier colleges and universities.

The schools serve as the center of activity for the many families drawn to the county because of the reputation of the system. They contribute to the quality of life and the stability of home values. They are the key reason for Oldham County's growth the past 30 years.

Residents place a significant amount of trust in the school system and ask little in terms of oversight and accountability compared to Fiscal Court. However, like any government agency, scrutiny and oversight are essential to ensure taxpayers are receiving the most bang for their buck. Given the Board of Education is the largest taxing jurisdiction in the county — the total school assessment is more than seven times that of Fiscal Court — perhaps more attention to detail is required of Superintendent Paul Upchurch and the district's performance.

Oldham County Schools as a whole are branded as "award-winning" and the top-performing school district in Kentucky. Residents are conditioned to believe all schools are high-performing and continue to improve. Certainly, Mr. Upchurch and the Board of Education have effectively promulgated this message through the media, to include its Web site.

In the Spring/Summer 2009 edition of "What's Happening in Oldham Kentucky, Ky." Superintendent Upchurch provided its annual report of excellence. In addition to recognizing award recipients — schools, teachers, and students — Upchurch presented academic performance results from 2008 and compared them to Kentucky's performance.

As one would expect, Oldham County schools exceeded commonwealth results in all categories. These results should reinforce residents' confidence in the leadership and performance of our schools — correct?

Not necessarily.

Last year, the Board of Education published its District Goals for 2009/2009. The seven-page document was posted on the Board of Education Web site in late summer of 2008. The document included four board goals. The first goal is "Improving Student Achievement."

The board established goals for each school with respect to achieving Kentucky Core Content Test academic index levels; achieving relative ranking of individual schools compared to all

public schools in Kentucky; goals for other national norm-referenced tests; ACT results for high-school juniors; and goals for Advance Placement results (percentage of students scoring 3 or above).

The goals assumed improvement from 2006-07 to 2007-08 in test results and school rankings. The bulk of the data was available last fall, to include the Kentucky Core Content Test results. However, the results compared to the board's goals haven't been provided to the public.

The question should be asked of Upchurch is why he reported academic results against Kentucky averages when he should report the results against the Board of Education's published goals. More importantly, why haven't those results been updated and available to the public?

Let's review the results against the Board of Education goals in order to generate a meaningful, public discussion of school performance and trends in this county:

For elementary schools, two of nine met their 2007-08 Academic Index goals. Four of nine improved from 2006-07. Two remained the same. Three of nine declined.

For elementary schools, one of nine (11 percent) met their adjusted rankings goal, although six of nine improved from 2006-07.

Of 27 data-point goals for Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (to measure progress against national norms), the district's elementary schools achieved a combined 16 (59 percent).

For middle schools, three of four missed their academic index goals, but all four did improve from 2006-07. Two of the four middle schools missed their ranking goal; two improved; one remained the same, and one declined.

All four middle schools failed to achieve their respective 2008-09 Explore goals and the middle schools collectively missed 8 of 24 Iowa test goals.

Two of three high schools missed their respective academic index goal, although two of three improved from 2006-07. All three high schools missed their ranking goal, with two of three dropping in relative ranking from 2006-07 and one remaining the same.

Two of three high schools declined in ACT score performance from 2008 to 2009.

All three high schools failed to achieve their respective AP scores goals for 2007-08.

Parents and taxpayers might be interested to know that four of its elementary schools are ranked 186 and lower in the state, based on their academic index results. The lowest performing school is at an adjusted ranking of 408 of all public systems elementary schools in the state. (Two others are ranked at 231 and 279.) Our highest ranked elementary school is ranked at 32nd of all elementary schools.

The parents of the Kentucky's best public school district should be interested in the Board's benchmarks and goals—not Kentucky's, which is ranked in the low 40s of all states.

What Mr. Upchurch owes the county is transparency of school performance in this district, and detailed analyses of the performance results of the county's schools against Board of Education and national benchmarks — not state benchmarks which are generally meaningless to the expectations of Oldham County parents and taxpayers.

Perhaps the goals set by the Board of Education were unrealistic. Regardless, the Superintendent had an obligation to publish the results with a full analysis and plan for corrective action in a timely manner.

There are many policy issues that with respect to how and where the plans for future growth that have impacted student and school performance and will in the future that need to be debated by the county as a whole. One thing is clear – as a county, we may have peaked with respect to the quality of our schools and that fact directly affects property values and the overall quality of life in the county.

This summer, the Board had to lay off 32 teachers due to shortfalls of its operational budget. That is equivalent to moth-balling an elementary school, or setting aside about \$10 million in recent “bricks and mortar” investments the last few years. Even though 11 teachers have been rehired, the resulting impact of student-to-teacher ratios will likely result in continued degradation of student performance in the future. Has the recent schools building boom created excessive non-core personnel requirements (administrative staff, lunch room and custodial staff, and school bus drivers) at the expense of the essence of the school system — its teachers?

It is time for parents and taxpayers to provide the same level of scrutiny they do of Fiscal Court to our schools. More importantly, it is time for Superintendent Upchurch to report out the results against the Board's goals, and explain the way forward to continue the tradition of excellence in our schools.

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