

**The Effects of the Kentucky Education Reform Act on the  
Departments and Schools of Education at Independent Colleges and  
Universities in Kentucky**

by

**Ramona A. Hall**

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate School

of

Tennessee State University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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December 2002

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## DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my parents, Charles and Dorothy Jordan, who have encouraged, supported, and believed in me. Their insight and guidance have been invaluable.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ without whose presence, mercy, and grace this paper would not have been possible. I am nothing without Him, I have nothing without Him, and I can do nothing without Him.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the United States has witnessed a very visible movement in efforts to improve the system of education. During this time, one word has continually surfaced and appears to have captured the essence of this movement - reform. Although the 1980s have been labeled "The Education Reform Decade" (Education, 1990), attempts to improve the quality of education at the state level forcefully continued throughout the 1990s. Medler (1994) reported that in each state, major statewide reform efforts to improve education were in progress. Several individual states have passed legislation as a result of their educational endeavors. Upon reviewing the legislation of states such as Florida, Oklahoma, Oregon, Massachusetts, Missouri, and Tennessee, it becomes apparent that a number of these reform measures were birthed from education finance systems declared unconstitutional. In 1994, Verstegen reported that in the previous 5 years, supreme courts in 12 states had made such a declaration, and many other states were involved in litigation. A number of state education reform acts were enacted because of these rulings, but perhaps most widely known is the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990.

Rothman (1997) stated that the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) is "the most sweeping education reform plan ever enacted" (p. 272). In June 1989, the Kentucky Supreme Court declared the state's public K-12 schools unconstitutional due to unequal funding. However, this ruling was just the beginning of what would later become

legislation that would overhaul the entire system of education. The goal of the reform was not only to ensure that all children learn, but that they learn at a high level of academic knowledge and skill (Spalding, Wilson, & Sandidge, 2000). Kentucky's efforts to achieve this goal led to what seems to be an infinite number of changes in curriculum, governance, and finance.

Clearly, reform of this magnitude has extensive implications for higher education. The importance of the connection between statewide reform and higher education cannot be emphasized enough. A representative of the American Association for Higher Education noted that the importance of higher education's involvement in statewide reform is increasingly apparent and without it, many K-12 schools are unable to realize reform goals (Lively, 1993). To maximize success and increase consistency, higher education must play a part in K-12 reform in ways of planning, implementation, and facilitation. Higher education in Kentucky is no exception. In meetings with the Task Force on Education Reform early on in Kentucky's education reform movement, university presidents made this same argument stating that higher education should not be forgotten as the state rebuilds its education system. (Stroud, 1989).

#### Statement of the Problem

Since its inception in 1990, the level of attention that Kentucky's colleges and universities have devoted to KERA has been unclear and even questioned (Muhs, 1995). Like other state reforms instituted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, KERA's plans initially did not directly include higher education, and the functions of universities were not considered in the overall design (Daniel, 1996). Over time, however, some

indications have gradually surfaced as to what teacher preparation programs at Kentucky's colleges and universities are doing to facilitate KERA's goals. Some literature is available on what state universities such as the University of Louisville, Morehead State University, Western Kentucky University, and the University of Kentucky are doing in support of KERA. What was not so clear, however, was how teacher education programs at the state's independent colleges and universities have responded to this legislation. Very little literature was available in this area. Therefore, the manner and extent to which these institutions have answered KERA's implications for teacher preparation were unclear. Because literature relating to independent Kentucky institutions was virtually unavailable, this study set out to gather information concerning their attentiveness to Kentucky's reform efforts.

#### Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of this study was to determine the effects that the Kentucky Education Reform Act has had on the departments and schools of education at independent colleges and universities in Kentucky.

More specifically, there were two primary purposes. The first purpose of this study was to gather data concerning changes these institutions have adopted as a direct result of KERA's passage. Not only did this study investigate changes that had been instituted, but it also set out to identify areas where changes had occurred, along with the extent of change in each of these areas. The second purpose of this study was to identify entirely new initiatives these institutions have introduced as a direct result of KERA. The

intent is to inform readers of new programs, projects, and facilities that have come about in response to KERA.

### Significance of the Study

This study was significant for three predominant reasons. The most obvious reason rested in the fact that there was a conspicuous lack of data and research that relates to the efforts of Kentucky's independent colleges and universities. Of the state's many independent institutions that have teacher preparation programs, literature could be found on the efforts of only two of these schools. This study provided an avenue through which these colleges and universities could disclose their endeavors.

Nystrand (1993) explained that the KERA was immensely quiet about higher education. At the same time, however, it presented many implications for teacher education. As Spalding et al. (2000) pointed out, the KERA required that many changes be made in how teachers teach and, by extension, in the manner in which teachers were taught. It obligated teachers to take on new roles and responsibilities as well as signaled the need for a rethinking of teacher preparation. This study was significant in this respect because it sheds light on the levels of commitment these institutions have to KERA and the implications for teacher education.

Five years after implementation, questions and discussions concerning higher education's response to KERA still surfaced. At that time, members of Kentucky's Task Force on Higher Education clearly expressed their desire for information on how well the state's colleges and universities were preparing its future teachers. They wanted to know how colleges' teaching methods had changed. In response to such requests, the executive

director of the Kentucky Institute for Education Reform stated that more data was needed in this area and that it was unclear what was actually happening at the college and university levels (Muhs, 1995). As recently as the year 2000, teacher quality and higher education as they related to KERA's goals topped the education agenda for the legislative session. Lawmakers were reportedly expected to investigate college-level teacher preparation programs (Harp, 2000). This study is significant in this respect in that it compliments such quests for information.

### Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What effects has KERA had on instructional methods and techniques in professional education courses at the departments and schools of education at Kentucky's independent colleges and universities?
  - A. What effects has KERA had on course content?
2. What effects has KERA had on student teaching?
3. What effects has KERA had on administrative procedures and policies?
4. What effects has KERA had on the development of innovative programs, projects, and facilities?
5. Is there a difference between institutional responses?
6. Is there a difference between the responses of faculty members, administrators, and faculty members and administrators?

A survey using a Likert scale was used to obtain information that relates to these research questions.

### Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study include the following:

- (1) The study is limited to individuals who were education faculty members and/or administrators at independent Kentucky institutions prior to 1990 and have remained at these same institutions.
- (2) The study is limited to only those education faculty members and administrators who choose to participate in the survey process.

### Definitions

The following term is defined as it was used in this study:

Independent Colleges and Universities are postsecondary institutions that are not publicly funded by the state.

## CHAPTER II

### RELATED LITERATURE

#### The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990

Nystrand (1993) reported that in 1985 a group of 66 Kentucky school districts and other educational organizations filed a lawsuit asserting that Kentucky's education funding formula was inequitable and inadequate. These property poor districts and other interested parties aimed their suit at a number of groups as well as specific individuals. Defendants included the governor, legislature, superintendent of public instruction, state board, state treasurer, president pro tem of the state Senate, and the speaker of the House of Representatives. In 1988, a trial court ruled that the Kentucky General Assembly had failed to provide an efficient system of schools and that the state's system for funding was in fact inadequate and discriminatory. In 1989, the case was appealed to the Kentucky Supreme Court, which later declared the entire education system unconstitutional. The breadth of this decision is best captured by examining the language the Supreme Court used in its ruling. It stated that the decision applies to all parts and parcels of the entire system; all statutes that create, implement and finance the system, as well as the creation of local school districts, school boards; and the Kentucky Department of Education. It includes school construction, maintenance, and teacher certification. The entire public school system in Kentucky was covered by their decision. The Kentucky General Assembly responded by creating a task force in July 1989 that would propose a remedy.

Faced with a court-imposed deadline to act before July 1990, the task force divided into three subgroups that focused on finance, governance, and programs. Each group solicited the assistance of an out-of-state consultant for leadership, however colleges and universities in Kentucky were intentionally excluded because they were viewed as part of the system being transformed. Some public hearings were held, but most of the task force work was secretly completed. On March 7, 1990, the task force adopted its final report. The final law, adopted March 29, 1990, was more than 800 pages in length and included programmatic changes as well as the funding necessary to pay for them. The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 was born.

KERA and other efforts by the state of Kentucky to improve its educational system have been described by researchers and educators in many ways. However, the descriptions given invariably allude to the massive scope of the reform. Nystrand (1993) explained that KERA is widely regarded as "the nation's most comprehensive school reform legislation" (p. 31). Moore and Benton (1998) wrote that the General Assembly of Kentucky is described as having passed "one of the nation's most comprehensive education reform packages" (p. 3). In 1997, Rothman declared it "the most sweeping statewide reform plan ever enacted" (p. 272). Eight years after KERA's inception, Kentucky maintained its position at the forefront as it was labeled "a leader in education reform" (Moore & Benton, 1998, p. 3). What does such an extensive piece of legislation encompass? KERA is most easily outlined in three broad areas: curriculum, governance, and finance.

## Curriculum

KERA is based on the notions that all students can achieve at high levels, that schools should be held accountable for student performance, and that there should be no curriculum mandates. Instead, each school should decide how students will reach desired outcomes and exhibit them through practical application of skills (Kentucky's Systemic, 1995). The foundations of KERA lie in the seven student capacities and six school goals as outlined in the Act by the General Assembly. The intent of KERA is to assist all students in acquiring the following capacities: (a) communication skills necessary to function in a complex and changing civilization; (b) knowledge to make economic, social, and political choices; (c) understanding of governmental processes as they affect the community, the state, and the nation; (d) sufficient self-knowledge and knowledge of one's own mental and physical wellness; (e) sufficient grounding in the arts to enable each student to appreciate his or her cultural and historical heritage; (f) sufficient preparation to choose and pursue one's life work intelligently; and (g) skills to enable one to compete favorably with students in other states. At the same time, schools are required to (a) expect a high level of achievement from all students; (b) increase students' rate of school attendance; (c) reduce dropout and retention rates; (d) reduce physical and mental barriers to learning; and (e) be measured on the proportion of students who make a successful transition to work, post-secondary education, and the military. The sixth school goal is to develop students' ability to (a) use basic communication and math skills they will encounter throughout their lives; (b) apply core concepts and principles from

math, science, art, humanities, social studies, and practical living studies that they will also later encounter; (c) become self-sufficient individuals; (d) become responsible members of a family, work group, or community; (e) think and solve problems in school and other situations they will encounter; and (f) connect and integrate experiences and new knowledge with what they have previously learned and build on past learnings and experiences to acquire new information through various media sources. All reform measures found in KERA center around these capacities and goals (Kentucky Department, 1990a). The State Board for Elementary and Secondary Education was charged with developing and disseminating to local schools a model curriculum framework to assist the schools in developing their curriculum. This same board was also given the responsibility of developing a statewide assessment program including performance-based student testing to measure the success of each school (Miller, Noland, & Schaaf, 1990).

By October 1 of each year, local boards of education were required to publish an annual performance report. Each school's success was determined by its improvement over a two-year period. Schools that successfully met their own threshold levels receive rewards and certified staff members at each award-winning school collectively decide on how the reward funds shall be spent. Schools that fail to meet or exceed their threshold fall into one of two categories: "not meeting threshold," or "in decline." Those schools not meeting the threshold were required to devise and submit a school transformation plan to the Department of Education. Those schools in decline were sanctioned by the state, required to devise a transformation plan, and assigned a Kentucky Distinguished

Educator to work with staff on areas of weakness. Schools that are particularly unsuccessful may be declared a "school in crisis." In such a case, students may transfer to more successful schools, and the state imposes sanctions that may result in the dismissal of certified staff if improvements are not forthcoming (Kentucky Department, 1990b, *passim*).

KERA also established a Commonwealth School Improvement Fund designed to provide grants to schools in deficient districts and help them pursue new and innovative methods to elevate performance. A statewide program of professional development for teachers and other certified employees was also established. Another significant change brought about by the new legislation was the establishment of school-based decision-making councils. By 1996, all schools were required to participate in school-based decision making, and each school was to have a council to adopt policies that relate to all aspects of school management including instructional materials, personnel, curriculum, and extracurricular programs. Other new programs included a statewide early childhood education program for 4-year olds who are at risk of educational failure and free preschool education and related services for handicapped children. In addition, family resource centers and youth services centers were created to provide services to students and families in economically disadvantaged areas. KERA also created the Council for Education Technology to develop specific plans for purchasing, developing, and using technology in public education. This endeavor also allowed for provisions that assist and encourage each certified teacher to purchase a computer (Kentucky Department, 1990b).

Another significant part of Kentucky's reform is the Primary School Program. As a result of its implementation, elementary school students no longer proceed through grades one through three as before. The Primary School Program replaced grades 1-3 and required that students successfully complete the program before entering fourth grade. Therefore, the first 3 years of elementary school involved multi-age and multi-ability classes. KERA also made other changes, such as extending the number of days and hours per day for kindergarten, requiring schools to provide continuing education for students who need additional time for instruction, and raising the age for compulsory school attendance from 16 to 18 (Kentucky Department, 1990a).

#### Governance

Miller et al. (1990) reported that with the onset of KERA a number of new governing bodies were established to oversee the implementation of the new legislation. The educational system was also restructured in many ways. For example, the State Board for Elementary and Secondary Education was created to adopt policies by which the Department of Education is to be governed. It was also given the responsibility of hiring the Commissioner of Education - a position previously held under the titles Chief State School Officer and Superintendent of Public Instruction. The state's first Commissioner of Education was appointed in January 1991 and given the responsibilities of implementing educational policies and directing all persons employed in the Department of Education. At the same time, all positions in the Department were abolished, and the Department was restructured according to the new positions and qualifications outlined by the Commissioner. Regional service centers were established

to focus on the professional development of school district employees, and the Department also created a Principals' Assessment Center and Superintendents' Training Program and Assessment Center. These centers administer and oversee new training that principals and superintendents must successfully complete to be qualified for initial or continued employment. Another newly created governing body was the Education Professional Standards Board. This board was charged with establishing requirements for acquiring and maintaining a certificate to teach, evaluating college and school district programs for school personnel preparation, and issuing and revoking teaching certificates. This board also oversees the alternative certification program. In addition, the Office of Education Accountability was established as an independent extension of the Legislature. It monitors the implementation of the Reform Act, reviews the state's school finance system, verifies the accuracy of performance at the district and state levels, and investigates unresolved allegations of wrongdoing at the state, regional, or district levels.

### Finance

The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (Kentucky Department, 1990a) began with allegations of an unfair and inadequate funding formula. Ironically, finance is the shortest portion of the entire legislation. At the state level, the Support Education Excellence in Kentucky (SEEK) fund was established. It guarantees a set amount of money per student throughout the state. Adjustments, such as the costs of educating at-risk children as indicated by participation in the free lunch program, educating exceptional children, and district transportation expenses, are then made to SEEK. Also,

state level funds are provided for preschool, students in need of additional instruction time to achieve educational goals, superintendents' training programs, and the Kentucky Distinguished Educators Program. Grants were made available for family and youth service centers while the Kentucky Successful Schools Trust fund was created to reserve funds for award-winning schools that reach their threshold. Aside from taxes, several provisions were made at the local level for support, such as school board action, as well as a vote of the people. The Act also addressed areas of finance that pertain to teachers. Teachers would no longer be paid less than the minimum statewide salary schedule adopted in the state budget, and a Kentucky Professional Compensation Plan was developed and implemented.

#### Other Statewide Reform Efforts

Since the early 1980s, individual states' efforts to improve their educational systems through statewide reform measures have become increasingly prevalent. Each of the 50 states has at some time or another imposed significant statewide reform legislation (Medler, 1994). Although much state reform activity occurred throughout the country prior to 1990, KERA has and continues to influence statewide legislation to a great extent. In reference to KERA, Atwood, Shake, Slaton, and Hales (1996) wrote, "Many of these changes are part of reform efforts in other states as well" (p. 193). In fact, other states' approaches to reforming education are so similar to that of Kentucky that it appears that KERA has become somewhat of a blueprint. During the same year KERA was adopted, two other states, Florida and Oklahoma, passed their own statewide education reform acts. Since 1990, Oregon, Massachusetts, Missouri, and Tennessee

have done likewise. In reviewing these states' legislation, similarities to KERA become very apparent.

### Florida

Medler (1994) wrote that the Florida Education Reform Act of 1990 created a system of school improvement that is centered around student performance and education programs. The system introduced state and local education goals, made educational outcomes a priority over processes in assessing school programs, and restructured the use of state fiscal and human resources to help schools realize goals. The legislature adopted seven statewide goals for education: (a) communities and schools that collaborate to prepare children and families for children's success in school; (b) students that graduate and are prepared to enter the workforce and postsecondary education; (c) students that successfully compete at the highest levels nationally and internationally and are prepared to make well-reasoned, thoughtful and healthy lifelong decisions; (d) school boards that provide a learning environment that is conducive to teaching and learning; (e) communities that provide an environment that is drug-free and protects students' health, safety, and civil rights; (f) a school, district and state that ensure professional teachers and staff; and (g) adult Floridians who are literate and have the knowledge and skills needed to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The Act also created the Commission on Education Reform and Accountability. This Commission established performance standards indicating progress toward state and local goals and created methods of measuring progress, incentives for schools that make exceptional progress, and guidelines for handling schools that fail to improve. School