



The Kentucky Model

Business and Education Unite to Prepare Students for College and Career Success

By **Jessie Azrilian**

In 2010 Kentucky became the first state to adopt more rigorous performance assessments for English and mathematics known as Common Core State Standards. When the first set of test results applying the new standards were released for the 2011-12 school year, the number of elementary and middle school students who were ranked “proficient” in reading and math the previous year dropped by a third.

The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce and Greater Louisville Inc. (GLI) viewed the new assessments, which emphasize deeper critical thinking, as a way to ensure Kentucky graduates would be more competitive in a global economy. The two chambers worked aggressively to engage the business community and alleviate anxiety among parents, teachers, employers and civic leaders by explaining that standards preparing students for college and careers should reflect international benchmarks and that achieving these objectives would take time. When the lower scores were unveiled, education stakeholders across the state were prepared for a public backlash, but were instead met with a community resolved to reach the bar that had been raised.

Kentucky’s Foundation for Education Reform

The Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), an ambitious education overhaul passed two decades ago after the State Supreme Court deemed the Kentucky education system unconstitutional, had done little over the years to improve students’ dismal English and math scores on national tests. In 2009 bi-partisan state legislation mandated that Kentucky adopt more rigorous assessment and accountability standards. At the same time, a consortium of state leaders, educators, and subject-matter experts, led by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, was developing a blueprint for new academic standards for K-12 education that aligned with college readiness expectations and international benchmarks. Kentucky joined the consortium and adopted the Kentucky Core Academic Standards. Because the common core English and math standards were still in draft form, Kentucky recruited collegiate faculty and K-12 teachers across the state to review and edit the state’s new assessments and standards. ▷

Controversy

In Kentucky, early communications about common core attempted to:

- prepare the public for the initial shock from lower test scores
- alleviate parents' concerns that their children were being forced to meet unreasonable demands
- highlight teachers' support and frustrations as they implemented the new standards

More recently, messaging has focused on countering charges that common core standards are federally mandated (they are not) or that the government is taking local control away from the schools. (The federal government favors common core standards, but leaves curriculum and instruction decisions to states and local school districts.) As 45 states begin to roll out next generation standards and assessments based on common core, other issues will arise such as the cost of implementation and the preparedness of teachers and schools for such a large undertaking. Early adopter states like Kentucky, and the work of the Kentucky State Chamber and Greater Louisville, Inc., are models of how to unite business and education stakeholders in preparing their communities to meet education standards once the bar has been raised.

Firm Grounding in Education Issues

GLI has a longtime relationship with the Jefferson County Public School District (JCPS). GLI supported the new superintendent and worked with the school board to strategically align education competencies with the needs of the business community.

Both the Kentucky Chamber and GLI work closely with the Pritchard Committee for Academic Excellence (PCAE), a private non-profit organization that advocates transparent and accurate information regarding public school standards. In 2009 PCAE, in coordination with the Kentucky Chamber Foundation, formed Business Leader Champions for Education, a group of business leaders supporting higher standards for Kentucky's education system.

The office of former Louisville Metro Mayor Jerry Abramson (2003-11) was highly engaged in the city's K-12 education system. In 2008 he convened a meeting of business, education, civic, and community leaders focused on raising education attainment. In 2010 the group signed the Greater Louisville Education Commitment with the goal of adding 40,000 more bachelor's degrees and 15,000 more associates degrees by 2020. The non-profit organization 55,000 Degrees was launched as a result of the commitment of newly elected Mayor Greg Fischer, who assumed the role of board chairman.

Foundation Support

GE Foundation has supported college-readiness in Kentucky through a series of multi-year grants for advancing science and math achievement and for increasing graduation and college-enrollment rates. Jefferson County's was the first school district in the country to receive GE Foun-



ation's Developing Futures in Education award to implement science and math initiatives. Representatives from the JCPS, GLI and the Kentucky Chamber are regular attendees of GE's two-day business and education summit focused on the importance of providing a unified business voice about common core state standards.

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided funding to the Kentucky Chamber Foundation to develop the chamber's communications and business outreach campaign to build a coalition of business leaders advocating for college-and-career-ready standards and assessments in Kentucky.

Lumina Foundation supported the development of 55,000 Degrees, a public-private partnership seeking to increase education attainment by creating 55,000 more bachelors and associates degrees in Louisville by 2020.

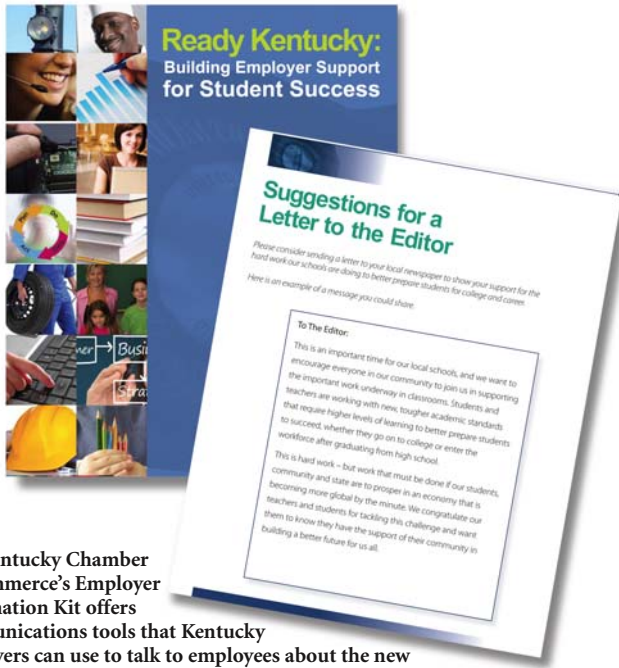
Building a Campaign

GLI partnered with the Jefferson County Public Schools superintendent and PR department, as well as the Louisville Metro Government, to prepare a strategy to combat the potential backlash from the release of the test results reflecting the new standards. The strategy included writing op-eds, gaining parental buy-in through the local PTA, and maximizing partners' and stakeholders' networks and communications platforms to propel their message.

In Jefferson County, a local school board election that coincided with the common core outreach campaign provided another opportunity to influence the future of the new assessments. With three open seats to fill, GLI brought extra attention to the election by stressing in its endorsement process the candidates' stances on reform and common core standards.

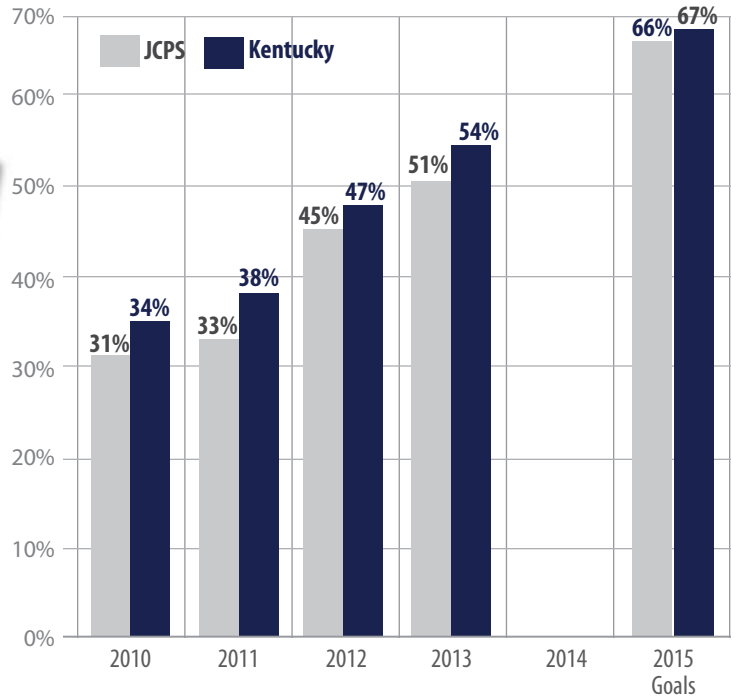
The Kentucky Chamber and the state's Department of Education developed a statewide awareness campaign targeting employers.

- Dave Adkisson, CEO of the Kentucky Chamber, and Terry Holliday, Kentucky Education Commissioner, travelled across the state to meet with workforce investment boards, business organizations, chambers of commerce, and rotary clubs to present the case for how higher standards prepare Kentucky's workforce to be competitive in a global economy. ▷



The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce's Employer Information Kit offers communications tools that Kentucky employers can use to talk to employees about the new standards and what they mean for their community and state. The kit includes items such as FAQs, a sample newsletter, and sample letters to the editor.

More JCPS Grads Ready for College/Career



Courtesy of 55000 Degrees; College/Career Readiness is defined by the Kentucky Department of Education.



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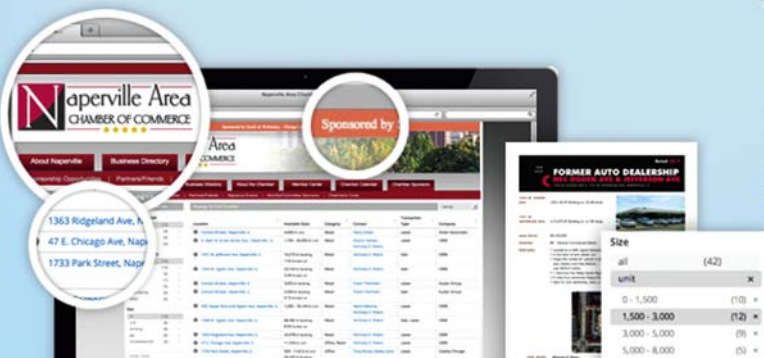
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www.businessandeducation.org

- The Kentucky Chamber website features a short video with employers being interviewed on the importance of rigorous K-12 standards for workforce development, and customizable resources for businesses to use as their own. At least 3,000 employer toolkits containing templates of newsletters, letters to the editor, and issue briefs were distributed across the state to the chamber's membership and state human resources organizations.

For both the Kentucky Chamber and GLI, two factors were critical for a successful communications campaign:

Consistent Messaging: Shortly after common core adoption, GLI worked with advocacy organizations and held focus groups to develop a communications plan that would engage education advocates and target the business community. Once talking points were developed, it was critically important to maintain a consistent message.

Tailored Communications to teachers, parents, employers and civic leaders: Both chambers approached outreach with an organized strategy to use all available networks.

- The State Department of Education distributed materials to schools. In Louisville, the local school district and PTA directed their outreach towards parents, creating PSAs, assembling information packets, and providing content and narrative for the media. The business community delivered its message through business journals, op-eds, and board meetings; GE Foundation, working with GLI, created information packets for business owners and employers.

What about your chamber?

"A key element of the new standards is that they are designed to make students ready for the workplace as well as college," says Dave Adkisson, president and CEO of the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce. "This is particularly important to Kentucky's employers who want workers who are equipped with the skills, particu-

larly critical thinking skills, to be internationally competitive. We strongly support these more challenging standards in Kentucky's schools and will continue to push for their full implementation."

Chambers are intermediaries, bridging the education and business communities in seeking a well-prepared future workforce. In leveraging their networks, community relationships and staff expertise, chambers are poised to lead the effort that will ensure America's students are globally competitive for the first time in decades. Consider:

- Employers and business leaders lend credibility as advocates because they are the ones who depend on a skilled and competitive workforce. Harness their voices through op eds, Letters to the Editors, signed ads in business publications, and published testimonials.
- Chamber staffers who handle policy, government relations or workforce development can coordinate the effort, with the membership team leveraging their relationships and the chamber's communications team using their networks and platforms.
- Seek outside resources for support in developing materials, covering transportation and meeting costs, supplementing staff support and providing consulting services.
- Partner with an education advocacy organization with existing relationships in your state to help propel your message.
- Reach out to your chamber peers to learn best practices and lessons from their experiences. ☑



Jessie Azrilian is manager of ACCE's new Education Attainment Division. For more information and to see a roster of your chamber peers engaged in education and workforce development, visit: <http://www.acce.org/divisions/ead>.