

STATEWIDE NEWS

Education leaders to watch for pension reform

BY AARON MUDD
Bowling Green Daily News

Local educators will be watching state lawmakers closely in 2019 as they take another shot at fixing Kentucky's strained pension system and possibly grapple with a charter schools funding mechanism.

Although lawmakers won't consider a state budget this year, Kentucky's Department of Education will ask them to let K-12 funding follow students to a charter school of their parent's choice.

That notion has drawn mixed reactions from some lawmakers, including Sen. Mike Wilson, R-Bowling Green, who told regional superintendents in a meeting last month that he doesn't see much eagerness among lawmakers for that concept.

"I don't have an appetite for doing that. I think there's a lot of us that don't have an appetite for doing that," Wilson said.

Lawmakers passed legislation in 2017 to clear the way for public charter schools in Kentucky, but so far they've failed to approve a permanent funding mechanism that would allow them to open.

Some lawmakers, however, seem open to considering a charter schools funding mechanism this legislative session,

which begins Jan. 8.

Sen. President Robert Stivers, R-Manchester, and Sen. Damon Thayer, R-Georgetown, have said they support passing legislation to get that done, according to The Courier Journal.

Bowling Green Independent School District Superintendent Gary Fields told the Daily News on Thursday, with state spending on K-12 education stagnating over the last decade, the time for discussing charter schools funding "isn't now."

Although lawmakers included a modest increase in per-pupil funding in the two-year budget they approved last spring, Fields said those kinds of increases aren't enough to keep up with the growing cost of educating Kentucky's students.

"We've seen no change in our funding model at the K-12 level," over the last decade, Fields said, adding the state is increasingly sticking local districts with the bill.

"It puts more burden on the local taxpayers to pay the bills for the state," he said.

Despite that, charter school advocates have continued pushing for a permanent funding mechanism they say would ultimately level the playing field for disadvantaged students.

Among them is Kentucky

Education Commissioner Wayne Lewis, who told the Daily News in November affluent families already have school choice by being able to buy a house in the right neighborhood. "The folks that don't get the opportunity to make those types of decisions are poor people," he said.

Gary Houchens, a WKU professor and charter schools advocate who sits on the state's board of education, shares Lewis' view.

"It's a social justice issue really," he said, adding he doesn't see why lawmakers can't consider a charter schools funding mechanism in 2019.

"To me, this is not an appropriations question. I personally don't see any reason why it couldn't be dealt with this year," Houchens further argued recipients of some public services can already choose where to spend taxpayer money, such as Medicare dollars or Pell grants for college students.

"K-12 should not be regarded any differently from that," he said.

However willing or reluctant lawmakers are, reforming the Kentucky's beleaguered pension system may be too much of a distraction.

The state is at least \$38 billion short of the money it needs to pay retirement

benefits over the next three decades, according to The Associated Press.

Although Republican Gov. Matt Bevin and the GOP legislature have boosted pension spending, giving the Kentucky Teachers' Retirement System \$2 billion over the next two years, that doesn't leave much for spending on other services.

Lawmakers passed a pension reform bill in March only for it to be ruled unconstitutional by the Kentucky Supreme Court last month.

The law would have moved all new teachers into a hybrid pension plan and restricted how teachers used sick days to calculate retirement benefits, according to the AP.

Before retiring at the end of 2018, state Rep. Jody Richards, D-Bowling Green, called for an amendment to the state's constitution that would require all pension reform bills to be put out for public review 24 hours before a vote. "It's simply an attempt to have all sides heard before a pension bill is finally passed," Richards told the Daily News.

Lawmakers hastily passed their pension reform bill in the final days of last year's regular legislative session, a move that drove thousands of teachers to Frankfort to protest.

Teachers also lobbied lawmakers for greater K-12 funding, and although the General Assembly did spare schools from some cuts in its budget, it left in a 6.25 percent cut to higher education spending.

The cut didn't help Western Kentucky University.

Facing a steady decline in state funding and student enrollment, WKU ultimately decided to eliminate nearly 150 positions last spring as part of a \$27 million budget balancing plan.

The university will consider cutting academic programs this year and phase in a new budget model by July 1.

The new system promises to be more transparent and less top-down.

To accomplish that, the model creates several new committees with faculty representatives and other stakeholders who can help develop new budgets.

Ultimately, the goal is to help the university manage limited resources more efficiently.

"The model needs to be responsive to the market changes that we're going through as opposed to the past model, which was more stagnant," Andrew Laws, managing director of the Chicago-based Huron Consulting Group, which WKU has hired to help develop the model.

First-generation college grad gets NASA dream job

BY KARLA WARD
Lexington Herald Leader

Growing up in Southern Kentucky, Bryan Willis had a lot of jobs.

He started out doing farm work as a 15-year-old.

He worked as a dishwasher at a mom-and-pop restaurant.

There was the summer he spent at a chicken plant.

And then there are the 13 months cumulatively he worked in engineering at NASA.

Willis landed a Pathways internship at NASA soon after beginning engineering coursework at the University of Kentucky, and he has spent the past three summers working at Johnson Space Center in Houston.

Upon graduating from the University of Kentucky with a degree in computer engineering in December, he accepted a full-time position as a data systems engineer with NASA.

But the journey has been a somewhat unlikely one.

Willis, who grew up in Tompkinsville and Burkesville, is a first-generation college graduate.

He said his parents, who both earned their GEDs, always encouraged him to further his education, and scholarships helped pay for his tuition.

But going into college, he said, "I really had no idea what I wanted to do."

Willis spent his first three semesters at UK as a pre-med major before it occurred to him "I didn't feel passionate about any of it."

"If I was going to do something for 40 years, I have to like it," he said.

Switching majors came with a complication, though.

It meant he wouldn't graduate in four years, so he would have to pay for two semesters of schooling without the assistance of scholarships.

Willis decided it was worth it to make the change, but this time, he said,

"I wanted to be sure I made the correct decision."

He immediately began seeking co-op and internship opportunities so he could get a taste of what his future as a computer engineer would be like.

The only problem was, he had not had the same amount of coursework as the other students, and he didn't have much experience with the interview process.

"I was really just out-classed," he said.

But Willis didn't let that deter him.

He interviewed for job after job, even positions he wasn't interested in, to get the experience of interviewing.

When he got an email about the NASA program, Willis had had plenty of practice answering interview questions, and his confidence showed.

Once accepted into the Pathways program, Willis said it became clear to him he had found his fit.

His most recent work with NASA, and the work he'll now be doing full-time, is on a redesigned spacesuit.

Specifically, he said, he'll be working on the software for the portable life support system astronauts carry on their backs while outside in space.

"It's basically the software that runs the entire suit," Willis said.

He said the world will need that technology for a trip to Mars.

"It'll be a long time, but I think we will (go there) for sure," he said.

After enjoying Christmas with family, including four siblings who are thinking about college, Willis was moving to Houston, he said in a recent interview.

His fiancée, Kelsey Spivey, who he's dated for seven years, was going along.

A recent college grad herself, Spivey landed a job as an event concierge at a swanky downtown Houston hotel.

While they will miss having him close by, Willis said his family is excited for his future.

And so is he.

"I love my job. I love the people I work with. All of them love their job," he said. "It's exactly what I wanted, and I didn't even know I wanted it. But I do now."

Another for-profit college settlement eliminates millions in student debt

BY TOM LATEK
Kentucky Today

FRANKFORT — The second settlement in the last week with a for-profit college will eliminate millions in debts for students, according to the Kentucky Attorney General's Office.

Attorney General Andy Beshear said on Monday for-profit education company Career Education Corp. or CEC has agreed to reform its recruiting and enrollment practices and forgo collecting more than \$2.3 million in debts owed by more than 1,300 Kentucky students.

The announcement is part of a \$498 million national settlement with the Illinois-based CEC and state attorneys general that caps a five-year investigation, which was launched after numerous student complaints and a critical report by federal lawmakers, according to Beshear.

"As Attorney General, I am committed to protecting Kentucky families," Beshear said on Monday. "This settlement holds CEC accountable for its past abusive practices and it provides relief to hundreds of Kentuckians, many who attended schools of questionable quality and incurred debts that they could not repay nor discharge."

As part of the settlement, Beshear and the group of AGs alleged that CEC pressured its employees to enroll students and engaged in unfair and

deceptive practices.

These practices included making misleading statements or failing to disclose information to prospective students on total costs, transferability of credits, program offerings and job placement rates, Beshear said.

CEC denied the allegations of the attorneys general but agreed to resolve the claims through this multi-state settlement.

CEC does not have brick and mortar locations in Kentucky and has closed or phased out many of its schools nationwide over the past 10 years. It currently offers only online courses through American InterContinental University and Colorado Technical University.

Its brands have included Briarcliffe College, Brooks Institute, Brown College, Harrington College of Design, International Academy of Design & Technology, Le Cordon Bleu, Missouri College and Sanford-Brown.

CEC has agreed to forgo collection of debts owed by students who either attended a CEC institution that closed before Jan. 1, 2019, or whose final day of attendance at American InterContinental University or Colorado Technical University occurred on or before Dec. 31, 2013.

Over the next two months, impacted students will receive a letter from CEC notifying them of the debt cancellation and that the credit reporting agencies are being notified as well.

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