

## Unbridled Learning in Kentucky

By Doug Walker and Anthony Marchese



Thoroughbred horses—some grazing, others galloping—along the fence line of a beautiful farm of verdant rolling green hills; this is the Bluegrass State.

Even the Commonwealth of Kentucky vision and logo capture this sense of idyllic place. In the fall of 2004, Kentuckians overwhelmingly voted their preference for the state motto *Kentucky Unbridled Spirit*.

The accompanying vision statement is equally stirring: “Kentucky is a place where spirits are free to soar and big dreams can be fulfilled. We relish competition and cherish our champions for their willingness to push beyond conventional boundaries to reach new heights of success.”

When Dr. Terry Holliday became Commissioner of Education in Kentucky in 2010, he led the adoption of a comparable vision and logo for the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE)—*Unbridled Learning*. Since then, Dr. Holliday has guided the transformation of KDE’s programs and services to support Kentucky educators as they prepare all students for college and/or career.



Dr. Holliday describes KDE’s vision this way: “*Unbridled Learning* is the logo for our accountability model. Its genesis was in state legislation called Senate Bill One, but everybody gets kind of bored with that title. We have a state motto called *Unbridled Spirit*, and so we took it

and made it *Unbridled Learning* and that’s where all of our state goals and accountability reside. This coalition actually started during Race to the Top application period. This group actually helped us draft our application, and we decided to keep them together for implementation purposes and provide feedback during the process. It’s been very helpful. I would advise any State Chief to have kind of a kitchen cabinet with all of the groups at the table meeting quarterly.”

Karen Dodd, PMP, Director of the Commissioner’s Delivery Unit further explains the constitution and purpose of the *Unbridled Learning* coalition. As she put it, “We bring education stakeholders together to tackle all of the issues and to improve student outcomes. We do have representatives from all over: Kentucky Leads the Nation, Educational Performance Standards Board, the Prichard Committee, several universities, district superintendents and many more. We all come together and talk

about what we are seeing in terms of trends with our student outcomes as well anything that affects those student outcomes. With all of these stakeholders, how do we problem solve? How can they help us communicate more broadly? How can they help us with funding problems- which is a current issue and what are they hearing that we might not be hearing? We want their input and their help."

The spirit of *Unbridled Learning*, and its promise of inspiration and hope for the future, is reflected in the organizational structure and programs at KDE. Many education services are delivered by staff in divisions and units with names like *Next Generation Schools and Districts*, *Next Generation Standards and Assessments*, and the *Division of Innovation and Partner Engagement*.

The Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center's (ARCC) Kentucky team is working alongside a number of KDE teams to enhance their capacity to implement and sustain unbridled learning across the state. ARCC and KDE staff are collaborating on a new initiative that includes various strategies intended to bring to life in Kentucky schools the six critical attributes of innovative learning, as follows:

1. World class knowledge and skills
2. Personalized learning
3. Anytime, anywhere learning
4. Student voice
5. Performance-based learning
6. Comprehensive systems of support

The director of KDE's Division of Innovation and Partner Engagement, David Cook, recognizes the many challenges and paradoxes inherent in the effort to reshape a bureaucracy to catalyze innovative learning and teaching. "It is a constant challenge to work as a state agency assisting schools, organizations that are rooted in policies and successful practices of the past, to envision learning required by the present and future lives of our students and to inspire, model, and support innovative learning, teaching, and leading," observes Cook. The division is learning from several like-minded state education agencies that are participating in the Council of Chief State School Officers' Learning Innovation Lab.

The ARCC Kentucky team includes Dr. Anthony Marchese and Dr. Doug Walker, with support from Jeannine Branch. Using a variety of resources, tools, and technical assistance techniques, this team is committed to helping KDE make the spirit of *Unbridled Learning* a reality for all Kentucky learners.

