

# Wealth in Kentucky and how it impacts College Readiness

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Almost three decades ago, Kentucky embarked on a grand effort to try and equalize education in Kentucky through KERA (Kentucky Education Reform Act, 1990).<sup>1</sup> KERA was designed to both invest more money in poorer school districts and to try and bring all students up to the same educational level in the State Public School System.

The current Federal Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has decided that in place of more educational resources and support, parents just need to be given more freedom and more choice to select better schools. Unfortunately, most parents, particularly those in poorer areas of the country don't have the luxury to simply send their kids to any school they may like. Moreover, charter and religious schools are not required to offer transportation to and from school, special programs for special needs students or even required to admit every student who applies. Freed of most regulations that require public schools to educate "all students", charter schools can "select out the best students and leave behind students who are more problematic" for the public schools. Like the magnet schools already in existence, they can claim by student selection, educational achievements not achieved in local public schools. But a critical question is, can inequality in educational opportunities truly be solved simply by providing the same amount of public dollars to a larger array of different schools?

The Kentucky experience may provide some insight. Kentucky has 120 counties with 170 public school districts.<sup>2</sup> Median family incomes throughout those public school districts varies greatly, from a low of \$24,516 (Owsley County) to a high of \$98,252 (Fort Thomas Independent).<sup>3</sup> The wealthiest School Districts are found in the Northern part of Kentucky and the poorest in the South to southeast of the State. Thus, not within easy driving distance. While some counties in Kentucky have two or more School districts, most counties have only one school district, so choice isn't really much of an option currently for most parents who depend on our public education system. Furthermore, it is doubtful that among the 9 poorest School Districts in Kentucky (those with a median family income less than \$30,000) there would be much interest or incentive in for-profit charter schools suddenly locating there.

If educational outcomes in Kentucky are only determined by the right educational environment and not by wealth, then one would not expect median family income in school districts within Kentucky to have any significant impact on measures of College readiness as defined by ACT scores (independent assessment of High School preparation for College).<sup>4</sup> Sadly, that is not the case. When plotting median family income in each school district against preparation for College, median family wealth had a significant impact on College preparedness. It accounted for nearly 40% of the variation between school districts throughout Kentucky (see plot).

That should not be a huge surprise to anyone. Wealthier families have far more disposable income to invest in educational opportunities and exposure for their children. Their schools can afford better quality facilities, higher teacher pay and more

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educational experiences and electives for their students, including college preparation courses. Their children are more likely to be involved in after school activities, sports, travel and to receive more teacher attention than students from poorer school districts in the state. Parents who can barely pay for rent, food and daily expenses and where half the families in the district live at or near the poverty level are unlikely to be able provide anything like that for their children. Poverty also affects emotional wellbeing and behavior. It impacts chronic stress and coping skills that affect school attention, motivation and depression. Poverty has effects on cognitive development and level of educational achievement, and even the belief of children that they can or could go to college.<sup>5</sup>

In short, wealth does affect student proficiency, and that is a reality outside of efforts in Kentucky to improve things over the last 27 years. Family wealth remains a strong predictor of future success and opportunities. We are far from a point where “everyone” has access to an “equal education”. Because education significantly affects future opportunities, wealth continues to dominate who will and who will not have a chance to develop their true potential in life. Ultimately, that decides individual social mobility, and who will and will not be able to transcend the social class into which they are born.

What role does “choice” have on this dynamic? Far less for the poor and disadvantaged, who will see the already limited dollars devoted to public education squandered on for-profit charter schools that will primarily benefit wealthier families or students with above average abilities, rather than those in greatest need of state resources. The problem was never about choice for the poorer counties in Kentucky. It was and remains about money, resources and investments that are needed to make their educational access more competitive with the wealthier counties in this state. Money to public education that will increase their opportunities for more experiences, help to improve the exposure they currently lack. More resources to help better prepare them for college and to encourage them along that path.

The idea that “choice” somehow will solve our educational inequities in this state is the “easy out”. It suggests the Federal government or State are trying to improve things. If education is just a matter of choice, no need exists to raise taxes to improve education and increase student performance. If competition is the solution, what question is being asked? Is it we just need more different kinds of schools so market forces correct our educational deficiencies? If choice is the solution to education, then if poorer districts still fail, is it now their own fault for choosing the wrong schools? Or is the real reason because we decided they are not worthy of more in tax dollar investments? If choice is the answer to improving educational outcomes, is public education no longer a social concern or a public responsibility, but a free market issue we can ignore? Sadly, school choice is simply a way of deflecting from the real problems we face in education today, and appears driven by a desire to ignore what remains our social responsibility and obligation to the future generations of this state. Wealth within counties makes a huge difference in educational outcomes, and if we do nothing to address this disparity due to wealth, we aren’t going to solve our educational problems, we are only going to

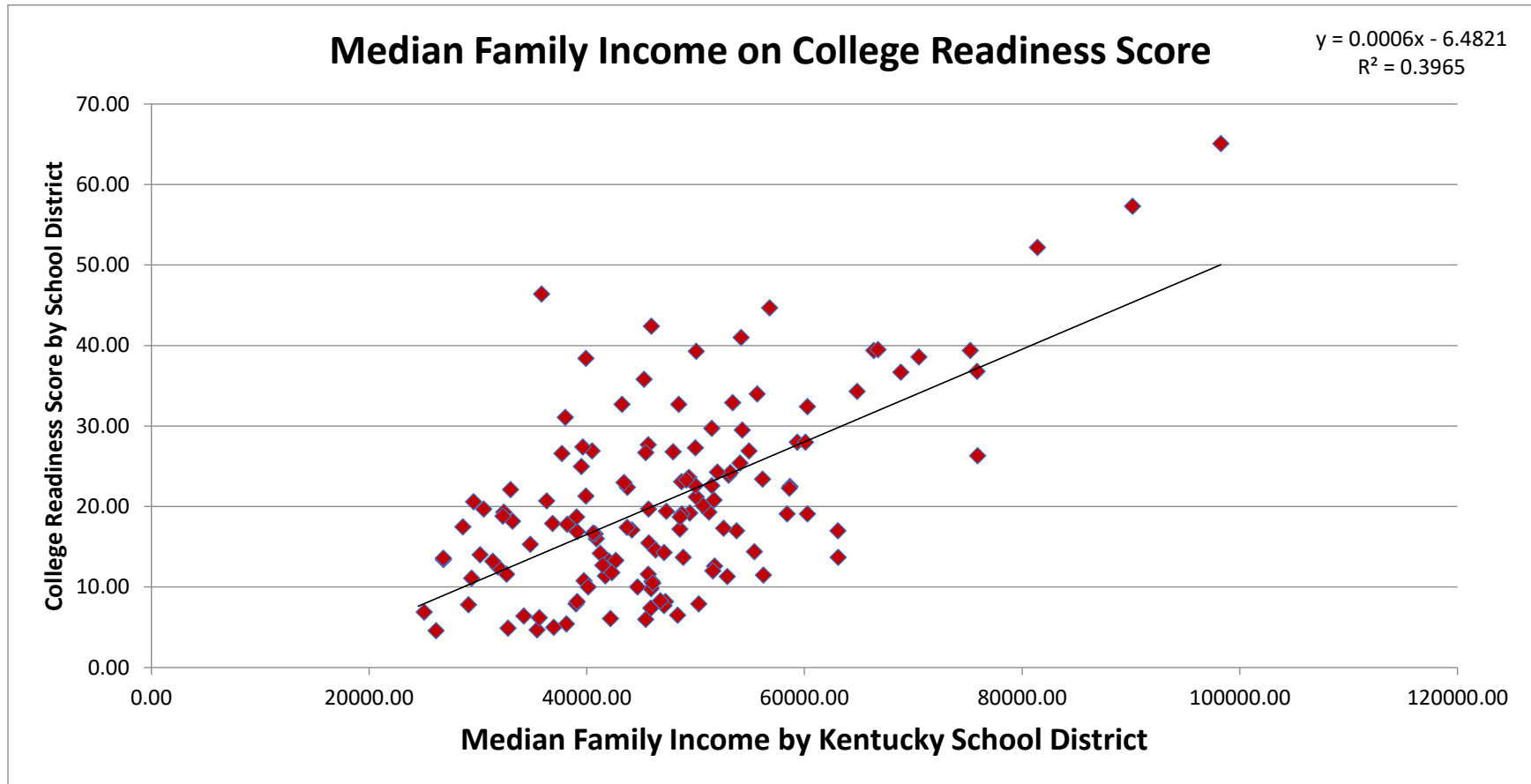
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make them worse. There is a far greater chance we will freeze social mobility to all but a few exceptionally talented individuals, in order to ignore our requirement to invest more instead of less in the next generation.

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There is a significant positive correlation between median family income in Kentucky School Districts<sup>4</sup> and College Readiness.<sup>3</sup> Median family income in each school district in the State predicts about 40% of College readiness in Kentucky. Income, even in Kentucky, affects opportunity significantly and those School Districts where the median family income is at the low end of this spectrum, are far less likely to be prepared for college or indeed have much opportunity to get a college education. Note, about 20 School Districts in Kentucky lacked any information on ACT scores (College Readiness) and all these School Districts fell at the low end of the Median Family Income range. School District median family income was considered a more valid indicator of student effect, since it best reflects family and not individual wealth in the District or wealth in county at large.