

Developing better readers: a *community* challenge

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*By Terry Brooks, Executive Director,
Kentucky Youth Advocates*

**Owensboro, Kentucky:
Who Are We?**



Developing better readers: a *community* challenge

There has long been consensus among educators that reading proficiency is key to academic success. Moreover, when students fall behind and cannot read at target levels by the third-fourth grade, teachers stress the difficulty students have in catching up and developing the skills they need to succeed in subsequent grade levels.

Literacy is a learned skill. Illiteracy can be connected with learning disabilities, but it can also be passed down from parents or guardians who cannot read or do not place a high value on reading and education.

How are we doing in Owensboro-Daviess County?

A “proficient” level in reading falls below the “advanced” level and above “basic” and “minimal” levels.

Under the 2001 federal “No Child Left Behind” program, 100 percent of students were to achieve the “proficient” level by 2013-2014.

In terms of reading proficiency, there are significant variances from top to bottom among Kentucky’s 250 high schools. Rankings generally correspond to economic disparity and minority rates – but not always.

According to the *U.S. News and World Report* 2013 “Best High School” rankings, as a percentage of the student body, Daviess County High School has half as many disadvantaged students as Owensboro High School (34 percent for Daviess County to 68 percent for Owensboro), and one-fifth the number of minorities (5 percent for Daviess County to 26 percent for Owensboro). Yet Daviess County ranks far lower in reading proficiency (30th percentile statewide) than Owensboro (56th percentile). **Note: Recently released state education report card places Owensboro High School behind Daviess County High School. (See “State education report card 2012 - 2013,” page 5.)**



Did you know?

- Only 18 percent of children are ready to enter kindergarten.
- The U.S. is the only free market nation where the current generation is less educated than the previous generation.
- More than 70 percent of U.S. inmates cannot read above a fourth grade level.
- Nearly 85 percent of juveniles who face trial are functionally illiterate.

Reading Proficiency

A comparison of proficiency in reading from a sampling of Kentucky's 250 public high schools

High School	Students	Disadvantaged	Minorities	Proficient in Reading
Lou DuPont Manual	1,885	17%	31%	98%
Frederick Fraize (Cloverport)	85	74%	0	91%
Beechwood (Ft. Mitchell)	546	12%	5%	88%
Hancock County	480	45%	2%	84%
Ballard (Louisville)	1,839	31%	39%	82%
Louisville Eastern	2,117	26%	30%	81%
Apollo	1,330	50%	10%	74%
Henderson County	1,994	43%	14%	73%
Lexington Henry Clay	2,214	35%	36%	71%
Lexington Dunbar	2,099	31%	35%	70%
Bowling Green	1,072	43%	32%	68%
Louisville Seneca	1,463	64%	52%	67%
Greenwood (Bowling Green)	1,166	31%	19%	65%
Owensboro	1,015	68%	26%	64%
Daviess County	1,599	34%	5%	49%
Covington Holmes	802	86%	42%	44%

Source: www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools

For an explanation of how *U.S. News and World Report* calculated the 2013 Best High School rankings:
http://www.usnews.com/education/high-schools/articles/2013/04/22/how-us-news-calculated-the-2013-best-high-schools-rankings_print.html

Local Public High Schools

Out of 250 Public High Schools ...

Apollo High School

82nd percentile (AHS ranked higher than 82 percent of the other scores)

- **45** high schools have a **higher level** of reading proficiency
- **3** high schools have the **same level** of reading proficiency
- **202** high schools have a **lower level** of reading proficiency

Owensboro High School

56th percentile (OHS ranked higher than 56 percent of the other scores)

- **110** high schools have a **higher level** of reading proficiency
- **4** high schools have the **same level** of reading proficiency
- **136** high schools have a **lower level** of reading proficiency

Daviess County High School

30th percentile (DCHS ranked higher than 30 percent of the other scores)

- **174** high schools have a **higher level** of reading proficiency
- **4** high schools have the **same level** of reading proficiency
- **72** high schools have a **lower level** of reading proficiency

Source: www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools



Other rankings

The *U.S. News and World Report* releases one of several school rankings annually.

Other rankings are published by the *Princeton Review*, *Huffington Post*, *Washington Post*, *The Daily Beast* and others.

Some rankings use the same sources. The rankings range from math and science to reading and college readiness.

According to the Kentucky Department of Education (in cooperation with the National Assessment of Educational Progress), from 1998 to 2011, fourth-grade reading scores rose from 218 to 225; nationally, the average fourth-grade

reading scale score rose from 213 to 220 during the same period.

Newsweek magazine ranks the Gatton Academy at Western Kentucky University as the top high school in the nation for math and science.

Twenty Kentucky schools are nationally ranked by *U.S. News* in college readiness, math and reading. Heading this list is Louisville's DuPont Manual High School at 169. No Owensboro-Daviess County high schools are nationally ranked in this *U.S. News* report.

State report cards just in

The Commonwealth of Kentucky released district report cards for the 2012-2013 academic year on September 27, 2013. The report included the following assessments of reading performance:

At the third grade level:

Distinguished or proficient

- **More than 54 percent of third graders in Daviess County elementary schools*** ranked either “distinguished” or “proficient.”
- **More than 47 percent of third graders in the Owensboro elementary schools**** ranked either “distinguished” or “proficient.”

Novice or apprentice

- **Nearly 46 percent of third graders in Daviess County elementary schools*** ranked either “novice” or “apprentice.”
- **Nearly 53 percent of third graders in Owensboro elementary schools**** ranked either “novice” or “apprentice.”

At the high school level:

Distinguished or proficient

- **Nearly 65 percent of Daviess County High School students** ranked “distinguished” or “proficient.”
- **Nearly 58 percent of Apollo High School students** ranked “distinguished” or “proficient.”
- **Nearly 47 percent of Owensboro High School students** ranked “distinguished” or “proficient.”

Novice or apprentice

- **More than 35 percent of Daviess County High School students** ranked either “novice” or “apprentice.”
- **More than 42 percent of Apollo High School students** ranked either “novice” or “apprentice.”
- **More than 53 percent of Owensboro High School students** ranked either “novice” or “apprentice.”

These rankings indicate that, in the crucial early grades, Daviess County elementary school students ranked slightly higher than Owensboro elementary schools. The pattern continues at the high school level.

Unlike the *U.S. News and World Report* ranking, the state report card places Owensboro High School students below Apollo and Daviess County High Schools in reading proficiency.

*Tamarack, Meadowlands, Eastview, Audubon, Sorgho, Southern Oaks, Highland, Country Heights and Deer Park

**Sutton, Newton Parrish, Cravens, Foust and Estes

Special reading initiatives

Programs such as these can attract broad community participation and complement school-based reading curricula:

<p>Ready to Read</p>	<p>Volunteers from the Owensboro Community and Technical College (OCTC) read to preschoolers at Dar-Nek Child Care on the OCTC campus.</p>
<p>Accelerated Reader</p>	<p>A national program whereby students earn points for reading on their own.</p>
<p>Imagination Library</p>	<p>A national program established by entertainer Dolly Parton. Participants who register receive a free age-appropriate book (from birth to five years of age), delivered to their home. In our region, the program is administered by Audubon Area Community Services.</p>
<p>Caught in the Act of Reading</p>	<p>Former First Lady Laura Bush, entertainers such as Drew Carey, Queen Latifah, John Lithgow and Rosie O'Donnell, public officials such as New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and professional athletes such as Tim Duncan, Ray Allen and Johnny Damon are among the celebrities who have been "caught in the act of reading."</p>
<p>Milk & Bookies</p>	<p>Founded by comedian Will Ferrell, boys and girls select, purchase and inscribe books that are then donated to peers who do not have access to books of their own.</p>
<p>America Reads</p>	<p>Volunteers assist students in reading at their schools. Audubon Area Community Services coordinates the program.</p>
<p>Jumpstart</p>	<p>Founded in 1993 at Yale University, the program places college student volunteers to work one-on-one with preschoolers.</p>
<p>Mencap</p>	<p>This program works with people who suffer from learning disabilities, as well as their families and co-workers. They fight to end discrimination and prejudice, and provide a wide range of services.</p>
<p>Junior Great Books</p>	<p>Established in 1947, Junior Great Books strives to advance critical, reflective thinking, social and civic engagement through discussion of works of enduring value.</p>

What more can be done?

These rankings and trends suggest that, in order to advance reading proficiency in Owensboro-Daviess County, it will take a community effort.

- It will take community support to ensure that all our children are reading at grade level by the third grade.
- It will take community support to ensure that adequate funds are available to attract and retain well-trained staff and volunteers for effective reading instruction.
- It will take community support to provide age-appropriate books in homes so parents and guardians can read to their children and instill in them a love of learning.
- It will take community support from not just educators and school boards, but from parents, business leaders, civic clubs, ministers, mentors and many others.

It will take a community that is aware of the urgency of the situation and the ramifications if we don't prepare our

youth with the tools they need to succeed. The social consequences are daunting. The challenges are ambitious, yet attainable.

“Nearly 70 percent of our elementary students, regardless of background, are reading at grade level. As they transition to middle and high school these numbers decline to 50 or 60 percent. Secondary school students struggle to adapt from learning to read to the more analytical and content-oriented reading to learn.”

Nicholas Brake, Ph.D.
Superintendent, Owensboro Public Schools



Letters

Note: The following letter was submitted in response to our May 2013 cover story, “Random Violence: How vulnerable is Owensboro-Daviess County to mass killings?”

Editor:

As Safety and Security Coordinator for Daviess County Public Schools, I was both concerned and intrigued by the questions posed in the article of the latest edition of the PLFO newsletter regarding school safety. This is an important topic to all parents and community members, brought once again to the forefront by the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

All indications are that the administrators of Sandy Hook were correctly prepared, and the swift response from law enforcement may well have prevented an even more disastrous loss of life. At the local level, our community needs to know that there are many people in every school asking difficult questions about the safety and security of our facilities. Our security team meets monthly to continually evaluate our policies and procedures. We search for best practices through study, going to conferences and seeking professional counsel. And our community should be assured that **School Boards are acting** by strengthening policy and procedures, investing in more secure entrances, placing security professionals where they can do the most good, increasing the number and quality of security cameras and improving access controls to our buildings with constant monitoring of those systems. The DCPS district has taken this commitment a step further by creating a position to oversee and coordinate the work of hundreds of people in our schools who remain vigilant daily to the safety of the children entrusted to our care. All of this is done in the context of something else that we believe is important to the Daviess County community: For our children to attend school in an environment that is safe & secure, but also welcoming and nurturing.

When it comes to the safety of our students and staff, we are never complacent, never fully satisfied that our job is done. We are always seeking ways to improve security while balancing that security with the desire for hospitable and welcoming schools. Questions and concerns from parents and members of the public are always welcome and can be sent to school principals, administrators or to my office: 270-852-7060 or emailed to jbarr@dcps.org.

Jim Barr

Safety & Security Coordinator
Daviess County Public Schools

PLFO grant proposals bring forth creative ideas for community problem solving

Forty-one organizations recently requested more than \$1.2 million in grants from the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro (PLFO). The PLFO board of directors authorized up to \$400,000 in grants to be awarded by the end of 2013. Some “Letters of Intent” proposed three-year programs (allowed in the guidelines) that totaled more than \$3 million.

The objective of the grant program is to make a significant impact on youth and education, more specifically in:

- Early childhood education**
- Reading proficiency**
- Teacher quality**
- Children living in poverty**
- Postsecondary educational attainment**

“This was an outstanding pool of applicants,” said Sally Wood, PLFO’s board chair. “Many outstanding proposals were submitted. We wish we could fund more.”

Eight organizations were invited to submit full proposals:

Audubon Area Head Start – Program expansion to serve infants, toddlers and teen parents

Cliff Hagan Boys and Girls Club – Expanded programs, facilities and equipment

Community Campus – New Tech Network/Regional High School

Daviess County Fiscal Court/Green River Community Foundation – The “Bring On Learning and Development (BOLD)” Promise Scholarship Fund

Daviess County Public Schools – Expansion of pre-school program

Imagination Library – Books, literary supplies, endowment

Owensboro Public Schools – Summer Reading Camp/Professional Development

Puzzle Pieces – Staff, program support

Following receipt of these eight proposals, the PLFO board of directors will make site visits and interview applicants prior to the organization’s December board of directors meeting, where the proposals to be funded will be selected.

The impact of kinship and child care cuts on low-income families

Kinship Care: When it is unsafe at home

Kinship Care is a state program that provides financial support to grandparents and other relatives who help raise children because they cannot live safely with their parents. Approximately 36,000 grandparents in Kentucky are responsible for meeting the basic needs of grandchildren, or about 1,100 in Owensboro- Daviess County.

A typical Kinship Care case:

A 63-year-old grandmother is raising her 16-month-old and 3-year-old granddaughters, both of whom were born addicted to cocaine. The children have special health care needs. They make frequent trips to the emergency room due to breathing difficulties and lung damage. The grandmother had to cut back to part-time employment. Through the Kinship Care program, she receives \$300 per month per child.

Story continues on next page

Since April 1, 2013, no new families have been allowed to receive assistance through the program. This forces more children into foster care, which costs the state more than \$2,000 per month.

Child-Care programs

A similar program to support child-care was also frozen as of April 1. State child-care assistance helps low-income working families afford child-care while they work, receive job training or attend school.

In addition, the state changed income eligibility limits for child-care assistance from 150 percent to 100 percent of the poverty level. Consequently, 8,700 Kentucky families will lose child-care assistance each month, or approximately 300

families in the Owensboro area. Many will be forced to quit their job or drop out of school.

“...8,700 Kentucky families will lose child-care assistance each month, or approximately 300 families in the Owensboro area.”

Budget pressures cited

Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear pointed to state budget pressures as the reason for the cuts in these programs. In the most recent fiscal year, the state had a \$71 million budget surplus.

The debate on low-wages: When, if ever, should government step in?

Low-wage jobs are defined as those with an hourly wage rate that is so low that even if someone works full-time for a full year, their annual earnings fall below the federal poverty line. For a family of four, that is \$12.89 an hour (2012). One-third of workers aged 16 to 64 (or 38 million people) earn low wages. That's about 12,500 people in Owensboro-Daviess County.

These jobs include retail salespersons, cashiers, food-preparation and food-serving workers, waiters and waitresses, janitors and cleaners, laborers and freight, stock and material movers and more. The average U.S. hourly wage is \$21.35. Nine of the ten largest occupations pay far less than this wage.

- If low-wage jobs do indeed serve a purpose, how can our culture affirm their value?
- Won't our economy always need people to accept these important, albeit unglamorous jobs?
- Is this a condition that we must accept as the price for a free market system? Can government do anything to proactively and responsibly increase wages?

At the current minimum wage of \$7.50 per hour, an employee working full time for a full year earns \$15,080 (less than the federal poverty level for a three-person household).

More than 120 municipalities in the U.S. have enacted living wage laws since the early 1990s.

For nearly four decades, wages and benefits increased by 10.7 percent, while the average price of a gallon of milk increased 162 percent.

In the United States of America, should anyone who works full-time be living in poverty?

Economic development specialists will be unsuccessful if they announce to a business or industrial prospect that they are only welcome if they pay a certain wage. Will not wages naturally increase when an employer realizes that they must pay higher wages to attract the talent needed for an enterprise to be successful?

Points and Counterpoints on the low-wage issue:

POINT	COUNTER-POINT
Employers only have so much money in their budgets for personnel. When higher wages are imposed, employers have no choice but to reduce jobs and lay off workers.	When an employer pays the minimum wage, they are really saying that they would pay less, but they're not legally allowed to.
If raising the minimum wage is a good idea, why not raise it to \$15-\$20 per hour?	Why not take a low paying job and split the wages in half so that two lower paying jobs can be created? That way, more people can be employed.
The marketplace determines the wages people are willing to accept. When large numbers of people apply for a new wave of job openings, they are saying that those jobs and wages are an acceptable improvement over their current economic conditions or prospects. If they are not willing to accept those jobs at that pay, they would not apply and employers would be forced to increase wages.	The reason why people apply for and accept low-wage jobs is because that is all that is available.
Many employers pay more than the minimum wage anyway. Most low-wage jobs are part-time jobs that enable young people to earn a little spending money.	A third of workers earn low wages, not just kids working in fast food. If employers are paying more than the minimum wage anyway, why is there such opposition to increasing the minimum wage?
The best way to increase take-home pay is through education and gaining skills that make an employee valuable to an employer.	Everyone cannot be an engineer. Workers who perform menial tasks will always be needed. These jobs are not connected to education. Income disparity is wider than ever.
If we lower the minimum wage, more people will be hired and we will get more people off public assistance.	So we will help people get off welfare if we lower the minimum wage?

A state Earned Income Tax Credit: An effective tool to stem poverty?

What is the Earned Income Tax Credit?

The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a *tax credit* extended to low-wage workers. It reduces the amount a taxpayer owes to the government.

A *tax deduction* lowers the taxable income.

Who gets help?

The federal EITC is designed to encourage and reward work. The tax filer must be working and earning wages to qualify.

The federal EITC helps families with children the most. The value varies depending upon family size, marital status and income.

Ten years ago, one in five Kentucky children lived in poverty; now, one in four do.

Kentucky's child poverty rate is higher than the surrounding states.

More than a quarter million Kentucky children live in poverty (a family of four with an income less than \$23,050 a year).

The EITC program lifts more people out of poverty than any other program – in 2010, 6.6 million people and 3.3 million children.

Kentucky does not have a state EITC. A state EITC program would cost the state about \$114 million per year.

Problems with a state EITC program based on the federal program

(Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, August 2012)

1. The federal EITC already achieves the original purpose: to lessen the disincentive to work caused by Social Security and Medicare taxes on earned income.
2. Administering the program is complicated and will lead to errors and fraud. There are frequent changes and Kentucky would have to adopt the federal changes each year.

Merits of a state EITC

(Kentucky Youth Advocates, August 2013)

1. A state EITC would help close the gap between what working families earn and what they need to make ends meet. Many people are struggling with part-time employment, and people who work full-time should not be living in poverty.
2. By using the same eligibility rules as the federal program, administration of the state credit would be simplified and calculated as a percentage of the federal credit. A state EITC at 15 percent would provide about \$300 for many working families in Kentucky.

Problems with a state EITC program based on the federal program

(Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, August 2012)

Merits of a state EITC

(Kentucky Youth Advocates, August 2013)

3. A Kentucky EITC would be a direct subsidy and outside the state’s budget process.

3. A state EITC would stimulate the economy since EITC recipients will have funds to apply toward local needs, home repairs, vehicle maintenance, additional education or training. Research shows a link between EITC support and improved education and health outcomes.

4. To apply for a state EITC, the applicant would have to file a state tax return. Many of these people are not currently required to file a Kentucky income tax return because their income is low.

4. Many businesses support the EITC because it helps low-wage employees with transportation and child care. Consequently, there is less absenteeism.

5. Low-income individuals would have an incentive to move to Kentucky from border states, thereby increasing EITC refunds and other public services.

5. In the last two decades, 25 states (including Indiana, Illinois and Virginia) and the District of Columbia have established state-level EITC’s.

Who supports, opposes a state EITC?

Supporters and opponents are generally aligned along party lines. Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear supports a state EITC, as does House Speaker Greg Stumbo and the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Tax Reform.

A state EITC is opposed by the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce, Senate President Robert Stivers and the Bluegrass Institute.



Community strategies to combat child abuse

by Terry Brooks

Imagine a few months down the road. It's a busy night in Owensboro. The city bustles with activity. The Owensboro Convention Center has finally opened and is filled to its capacity. The Owensboro Sportscenter is holding a crowd of 5,000. Now imagine that those in attendance at the two venues are there for neither a speech nor a concert nor a ballgame. Instead, they are the victims of child abuse in Kentucky during just the last twelve months. And the sad fact is that those large venues could still not hold all the victims of child abuse during the last year.

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that child abuse is about that strange guy in the park or the crazy neighbor down the block. And yet the statistics tell a very different story. It is not about those folks. Instead, the overwhelming prototype of child abuse in Kentucky is that a child – aged three or younger is victimized not by some fringe player in their life, but by mom or dad or a parent's romantic interest.

It is one thing to feel the emotion from stories. It is one thing to begin to understand the portrait of child abuse in the Commonwealth from data. But it is quite another to begin to think about combating this plague. How do we tackle that?

First let's be clear. We cannot begin to tackle child abuse without thinking about much broader social conditions and realizing that you cannot separate child abuse and domestic violence. You cannot separate child abuse and substance abuse. In fact, you cannot separate child abuse from pov-

erty. As long as domestic violence is on the rise, as long as substance abuse is at epidemic proportions, as long as more than one in four Kentucky kids lives in poverty – making us rank 48th in the nation in children's economic well-being, then child abuse is going to be a reality in this state.

But that does not mean that each of us cannot take action as individuals, in local communities and in the hallways of Frankfort to make a difference. For instance:

● Report abuse

Every Kentuckian must understand that the Commonwealth is NOT Penn State. Whereas in Pennsylvania, a citizen's legal responsibility is only to let someone know about suspected abuse, in Kentucky you have a legal as well as an ethical obligation to report abuse or suspected abuse directly to authorities. That report must be called into 1-877-KYSAFE or filed online at <https://prd.chfs.ky.gov/ReportAbuse/home.aspx>. And always call 911 if a child is in imminent danger or needs immediate protection.

● Coach, counsel

Secondly, local communities – be that a faith community or a civic club – can and should embrace the opportunities to support parents, especially young, first-time moms and dads. There is a lot to learn – that crying

is normal; that you can walk away for a moment; that it's natural to feel frustrated and tired. Many of us had great role models and other "parent coaches" when we were learning the ropes, but so many parents lack that network of advice and counsel today. Sunday School classes, neighborhood groups and others can be a big help to struggling parents.

● **Educators, doctors have key role**

Professional niches also offer real opportunities to combat abuse and begin to leverage prevention strategies. As an example, many schools are renewing their leadership role in battling abuse. Schoolhouses are beginning to understand that -- along with their roles as reporters of abuse and in helping parents think about abuse -- working with middle and high school students today about parenting responsibilities is a proven prevention strategy for tomorrow. Another profession that can stand up in combating abuse is the medical community. In what I find a stunning statistic, 80 percent of children who died from abuse last year were in a medical professional's office two weeks or less before the fatality. And yet doctors have fought successfully to have themselves exempted from mandated head trauma training. Really? These professionals who could be the last line of defense to keep children from dying think they are "above" being trained, while most other professions are required to receive training? I would encourage you to put the pressure on the local medical community to support mandated head trauma training for medical professionals as a research-based and immediate means to stem the tide of abuse.

● **Insist on accountability and independence**

Opportunities also abound in Frankfort for Kentucky's lawmakers to make a difference. In the aftermath of a series of child fatalities in the fall of 2011, Kentucky Youth Advocates held a summit in January 2012. Over 300 Kentuckians from some 80 counties gathered that Saturday to think through ideas large and small on fighting child abuse in Kentucky. The top priority to emerge from that public conversation was to establish an external

and independent review panel to look into fatalities due to abuse and neglect. In other words, let's find out what is working and what is not in the child welfare system. Governor Beshear responded and established such a group in 2012. The 2013 General Assembly took the Governor's good first step and strengthened the panel with legislation that ensured more access to records, a more open public forum, and added oversight of the panel by the legislative branch. That was a good second step. However, we still have a ways to go for this panel to reach its potential. For example, while the panel has legislative oversight now, it is housed within the Executive Branch. In other words, we are really asking the Governor to grade his own performance when it comes to protecting kids. We can increase independence and accountability by ensuring that this panel is not located in the Executive Branch. Another common-sense improvement can come from more transparency among panel members. Just as is the case with so many nonprofit boards, we need panel members to file public conflict/potential conflict of interest statements. Does a panel member's employer receive contract money from the state? Has a panel member ever worked for child protective services? Has a panel member ever launched an investigation or been investigated? Those kinds of questions are not intended to disqualify a single citizen from serving on the panel but they are intended to ensure that the public really knows "who is minding the store" when it comes to investigating the deaths of children from abuse.

Individuals taking responsibility for reporting abuse. Local community groups inventing innovative and pragmatic ways to support parents. Professional groups owning their ethical obligations. And state leaders battling abuse through policies that emphasize transparency and accountability. Ending abuse in the Commonwealth will come neither quickly nor from a silver bullet. But if we use the civic capital for which the Public Life Foundation and Daviess Countians are noted, Kentucky's youngest citizens can be safer from abuse and neglect. Is there any more pressing civic duty?

Terry Brooks is the Executive Director of Kentucky Youth Advocates.



Owensboro, Kentucky

by Tom Gaston

Who are we?

Editor's Note: Despite the new focus of the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro (PLFO) on youth and education causes – reflected in the articles and research included in this edition – we couldn't pass up another chance to publish a clever and timely piece by Tom Gaston.

A former college professor, Tom has adopted our community and jumped right in with good works and creative ideas – from magic shows and balloon characters for the kids, to serious research and articles on public issues.

We gladly share Tom's latest. Tom interviewed a cross section of citizens and community leaders toward the goal of bringing into focus the most effective community brand. His work is another example of the value of community dialogue and deliberation.

After almost unanimous rejection of the slogan it recommended to guide local economic development, a small Owensboro church declared itself undeterred last week and renewed its modest try at helping the community solve one of its knottiest problems.

The rejected slogan, “American’s Friendliest Convention City,” brainchild of a committee of the Open Door Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, was recommended, in an August 6 *Messenger-Inquirer* “In My View” column by Tom Gaston. They also suggested bolstering the “Friendliest” claim by mounting a community-wide effort to revive the once-universal custom of exchanging greetings whenever adults meet in public.¹

“Actually, our slogan fared no worse than the overwhelming majority of others suggested over the past few years,” said Roger Ingram, Board Chairman of Fellowship. “We are encouraged to see that the leaders’ consensus about ensuring a welcoming, hospitable image is compatible with the other recommendation of our committee and that there is a lot of thought about holding on to the best of what we already have.”

Following the Public Life Foundation’s policy of encouraging maximum public participation in community decisions, the *Public Life Advocate* encouraged the writer of that In My View

¹At least one Neighborhood Alliance has since shown interest in backing the effort.

column to test his suggested slogan by soliciting opinions from a group of informed community leaders and officials.

Where Are We Now?

He asked each to respond to eight questions. Here is a representative sample of their answers.

1. Is choosing a “brand” or slogan for our city a good or bad idea? Why?

Approval of the effort was unanimous, but interestingly three respondents qualified their approval:

Pronouncing a brand “absolutely critical,” Rick Hobgood, Board Chairman of the Owensboro-Daviess County Convention and Visitor’s Bureau (CVB), said that the group choosing the brand should be maximally inclusive. “If you get everybody involved, the branding will find its own path.”

“It can be either good or bad,” said Sean Dysinger, the CVB’s Sales and Tourism Director. “It’s only good if it’s authentic. People hunger for authenticity.”

Kirk Kirkpatrick, a longtime community leader now serving as a volunteer at the CVB, said, “It’s easier said than done, but it definitely benefits your ability to market. Otherwise, you’ve got everybody on their own.”

2. “If some do decide to make an effort to brand our city, is it important that everyone agree on a single brand or trade mark? Why?”

Two respondents left their “yes” answers unqualified and went on to make other points.

All but two of the others (seven respondents) mentioned the impossibility of pleasing everybody, but urged working for the “broadest achievable buy-in.”

Malcolm Bryant, whose downtown Hampton Inn and Suites will open this winter, echoed the answers of several in the majority: “The people who choose to be informed should decide, but they should respect the experts whose business it is to make these judgments.”

“Nothing can be more counterproductive than trying to promote several brands simultaneously,” cautioned Joe Berry, Project Manager, Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corporation (EDC).

One respondent, who did not want to be quoted on the point, mentioned a name for Owensboro that some would consider pejorative and suggested that care be taken that the chosen brand not be an easy target for distortion or ridicule.

3. If general agreement is important, whose views should weigh in that decision? Governments’ (which)? Businesses’? Convention Center managements’? Civic groups’? Churches’? Neighborhood Alliances’? Others’?”

Alan Braden, another longtime civic leader currently chairing the Mayor’s Committee on Business Development, named the Chamber of Commerce and several other entities. “Ask them their opinion and their logic,” he said. The more people you get involved, the better. You want to generate buzz in the community.”

Kirk Kirkpatrick agreed. “Everybody should be able to weigh in.” But he quickly added, “You want to start with your natural home base . . . and go from there.”

Most respondents named, at some point in their interview, essentially the same core list of “stakeholders”² and emphasized the importance, as the effort goes forward of everyone’s remaining “a team player.”

² Here, in alphabetical order, are all the entities named: arts community, bluegrass museum, business leaders, chamber of commerce, citizenry, convention center, civic clubs, CVB, EDC, festival groups, Friday After Five, hospitality association, museums, non-profits, parks department, “people who choose to be informed,” professionals (one to two representatives), soap box derby, sports community, “stakeholders,” We Are Downtown.

4. If the effort goes forward, what would be defining characteristics of a good brand or slogan?

Table 1. Desirable Features (Responses in order of frequency)	
Feature (synonymous and near synonymous terms counted as same)	Frequency (No. Respondents mentioning term or close synonym)
Inclusive/Suggestive/ Imaginative/ Multi-faceted	6
Attention-grabbing/Memorable/ Eliciting Powerful Image/Emotionally Evocative & Exciting/Catchy	5
Authentic/True/Appropriate	3
Simplicity/Brevity/Pointedness	3
Unique/Not Generally Applicable	2
Appealing to Dual Target Groups (Locals as well as Visitors)	2
Imaginative/Futuristic/Suggestive of Unlimited Possibilities	1
Produces Measurable Results	1
Includes a Common Search Engine Term	1

5. What might be some DISQUALIFYING features of a proposed brand, slogan or trademark?

Table 2. Disqualifying Features (Responses in order of frequency)	
Feature (synonymous and near synonymous terms counted as same)	Frequency (No. Respondents mentioning term or close synonym)
Anything Limiting/Too Narrow	4
Detailed/Wordy/Confusing/Includes Lot of Things	4
Not Distinctive/Applies to Many	3
No Litmus Test/Not Stepping Into That Arena/Reply Not Addressed to Question (Responses of Respondents declining to answer)	3
Easily Misread/Poor Taste/Open To Misinterpretation or Distortion	3
Not True, Merely Aspirational	3
Bland, Not Powerful or Memorable/ Trite	2
Tying To Products That Do Not Speak to Universal Feelings	1
Not Inclusive	1

6. How important, in your view, is “durability” or permanence in choosing a brand or trade mark?

The answers on this question proved nuanced and resistant to categorization.

General agreement that durability was highly desirable seemed to be balanced against concern about committing

to any image that might, in time, tether the community to an outmoded status quo. “Things do change,” Alan Braden cautioned, but it should be semi-permanent at least, not just a flash in the pan.”

Others agreed, noting that it takes a number of years to do the printing, change signs, etc., that carry a brand into the marketplace and measure its effectiveness.

The ideal, several noted, would be to find an image or phrase

that so perfectly captured the spirit of Owensboro that it would endure indefinitely.

“Look at St. Louis. It’s been the ‘Gateway to the West’ almost forever,” said John West, Race Director of the Owensboro Lions Club Soap Box Derby. “Yet when they built the arch in the sixties, they just enhanced that identity.” West suggests thinking in “a 20-year time frame.”

Stressing the need for authenticity, Madison Silvert, Interim President of the EDC, said, “It’s vitally important that we are who we say we are. If our image is truly authentic, it will stick, maybe for fifty years. The best brands happen organically.”

Others suggested shorter time frames, e.g., “At least 10 years to give us time to massage it” (Malcolm Bryant) or, declined to name a specific number. “It should have a permanent feel to it,” Kirkpatrick said.

Perhaps the sense of the group was best captured by Roger Stacy, former city commissioner, Chrysler dealer and current Realtor, who said it should last “as long as it gets the job done.”

7. One suggestion that has been advanced is “America’s Friendliest Convention City.” What is your immediate reaction to that one?

This, of course, was the suggestion advanced by the church committee that prompted Gaston’s *Messenger-Inquirer* column. Stacy was the only respondent who did not reject it out of hand. Even he was far from enthusiastic. “There’s nothing wrong with it,” he said dubiously. “I like the friendliness part, but it’s limiting.”

Table 3 classifies the objections raised. A comparison with Table 2 shows that all of them appeared on the list of disqualifying features generated by these respondents when the question was posed in the abstract. This suggests that, despite obvious difficulty in finding the right motto, the community does have a reasonably stable set of parameters in mind for the brand it is seeking.

Table 3. Objections to Suggested Motto
(Responses in order of frequency)

Not Distinctive/”Friendly” Could Fit Almost Any City	4
Not True, Not Enough Conventions/ Aspirational	3
Too Confining, Owensboro More Than Convention Destination	3
Bland	1

8. What have I not asked that would have given you an opportunity to make additional points you would like to make?

Shared Enthusiasm and Optimism

The overwhelmingly favorite takeaway message respondents emphasized was one of expectation and optimism. Either in answering this final question (four) respondents or in digressions while answering earlier ones (three) a total of seven respondents expressed pride in the city’s traditions, its amenities and especially in its progress in the past five years.

“I’ve lived a lot of places,” said John Austin, “Lancaster, San Diego, Houston—you name it. We’re doing stuff here; you can feel it. . . . a vibrant energy. . . . Towns like people either change and adapt or die. . . . This is what it feels like when a town overcomes its resistance to change. . . . Just look at what the Conders and others are doing downtown with their own money.”

“What an exciting place to be, to see the eyes of tourists,” Sean Dysinger said. “Day after day, they stop by the CVB on their way out of town, to say how impressed they were with what we are doing and how welcomed we made them feel. I can’t imagine that happens at many other CVBs.”

“How fortunate we are to have great police and fire departments and museums and arts and culture and strong leadership that promotes the common good, not special interests,”

said Rosemary Conder, Chairperson of We Are Downtown. . . . “We should have branded ourselves years ago.”

Conder is the only respondent interviewed who mentioned a preference for one of the suggested brands. A board member of Owensboro’s International Bluegrass Museum Museum, she says Bluegrass music gives Owensboro its best attraction for national and international visitors.

“Those Europeans take month-long vacations, when they come here they stay a while and spend here. She urges the community to tap into the growing popularity of bluegrass throughout the U.S.. “The new President of Yale University, Peter Salovey, is now also the new chairman of our board. He’s a great fan, and has a band, ‘The Professors of Bluegrass’ that travels widely.”

“Great Place to Raise Family” Valued

Ruth Ann Dearness, General Manager, Courtyard by Marriott, and one of the founding organizers of Owensboro’s Hospitality Association, named several attractive features of Owensboro, recalling that she had lived here from 1977-1999. Then, after 10 years, “This is where I chose to come back to, and I’m not from here. That says something.”

Joe Berry also cited Owensboro’s appeal as an appealing home town. He mentioned an ad the EDC placed recently in a magazine addressed to Kentucky businesses. “Small town values . . . Big city Amenities” was its claim for Owensboro.

The logic behind the ad, Berry explained, was that of an executive with a large corporation, who explained why that corporation turned down a lucrative package of enticements offered by Oklahoma City. “I didn’t want to live in Oklahoma City.”

Two other respondents made the same point.

Communication and Openness to Change is Key

Of Gaston’s church committee and the Public Life Foundation’s follow-up, Malcolm Bryant said, “What you’re doing is admirable. Communication is so important. Bricks and mortar has its limitations, but getting people involved is the key.”

Kirkpatrick and Dearness also stressed communication.

“There’s so much going on in Owensboro that no ordinary citizen can keep up with it,” Kirkpatrick said. “It’s absolutely essential that we develop one central source to be the place where everybody can go for the latest information on all the happenings.

“Then we need to train everybody, from hotel desk clerks to the citizen in the street just automatically to refer everybody to that source.” Creating a presentation to get that word to all frontline workers in the hospitality and convention business is the assignment Kirkpatrick has undertaken for the CVB and Hospitality Association.

Bryant urged that the chosen brand suggest openness, diversity and futuristic orientation. As an example of the kind of logo he favors, he suggested the words “Just Imagine!” — a logo whose meaning was completely open to interpretation.

Another respondent, apparently thinking along the same lines, applauded Nike’s “Just Do It” slash.

Importance of Marketing to Both Locals and Visitors

One additional point, stressed by four respondents, was the importance of making sure that the city’s branding appeals to locals as well as conventioners and visitors.

“We have people right here in Owensboro who have never visited our museums or visited our parks and festivals,” Dearness pointed out.

Back to the Drawing Board

The eight-member committee of the Unitarian Fellowship whose slogan suggestion motivated this survey will return to work next week.

“We’ll have a renewed awareness of the multiple—and sometimes seemingly contradictory—needs that must be met by whatever brand or logo gets chosen by a vibrant community like ours,” said board chairman Roger Ingram.

“But we are sure the community is up to the challenge, and we’re still convinced we have a part to play.”

We only wish that other sectors of the general public - es-

pecially other, and larger, churches - were also participating in the discussion.

“It’s possible that, in the end our only contribution to that effort will be to keep leaders and decision makers reasonably responsive to our concern that we not inadvertently lose the best of what we already have. We think most people, like us, value the friendliness and neighborliness and overall good feeling towards one another that makes Owensboro such a great place to live.

“We want to do all we can to make sure that whatever slogan or logo the city decides on does not undermine that.

“Meanwhile, we’re going to concentrate on the other part of our proposal--the effort to get grownups, wherever they meet, simply to exchange greetings.

“A smile, a nod, or a cheerful ‘Good Morning’ or ‘Good Afternoon,’ can sometimes change a visitor’s outlook on the whole day and whole community. If we could make those greetings as commonplace downtown as they already are on the Greenbelt, you’d be surprised at the difference it would make.”