DENVER, CO – The Commonwealth of Kentucky has been selected as the winner of the 2006 Frank Newman Award for State Innovation, given each year by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). The award, named in honor of the late Frank Newman, who served as ECS president from 1985 to 1999, recognizes excellence in state education policy and policymaking. The award will be presented at the 2006 ECS National Forum on Education Policy on July 13 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

This year's award is given to Kentucky for the depth, breadth and sustained focus of its education reform and improvement efforts over the past decade and a half. "I am delighted that the tremendous work to advance Kentucky's education system is once again receiving national attention," said Kentucky Governor Ernie Fletcher. "In recent months, I have become distinctly encouraged by the broad, non-partisan, support for increasing educators' base salaries, increasing technology in the classroom, adding two instructional school days to the school calendar, among others. Our recent focus on improving and supporting student health, as well as Mathematics and Reading, will make Kentucky a better place to live and work, as we move forward."

Among the many states whose public school financing systems have been invalidated by court rulings, the changes required of Kentucky as a result of Rose v. Council (1989) were among the most radical. Not only did the Kentucky Supreme Court declare the financing of schools in the state unconstitutional, but it also ordered that "the entire system of public education … be recreated and re-established."

The court ruling led to what former Governor Paul E. Patton has called "the most important event in the history of Kentucky" – passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA). Beyond simply providing additional funds to local school districts, KERA was a unique attempt to integrate school finance reform with curriculum and governance reforms, and it made Kentucky an early leader in areas ranging from standards-based school improvement to P-16 restructuring to decentralized decisionmaking.

Today, Kentucky is among the few states to have assessments aligned with state standards in the four core subjects at all levels – elementary, middle and high school – and incorporating multiple-choice and extended-response questions as well as portfolios. Achievement data are published on school report cards and used to assign ratings to schools. Those identified as performing below par receive assistance and are subject to sanctions if they fail to improve; high-performing or improved schools are eligible for rewards.

Kentucky also holds its teacher-preparation programs accountable. It assigns scores to each institution based on passing rates on teacher-licensure tests, as well as surveys of program graduates and their employers. The ratings appear on program report cards and are incorporated into the institutions’ accreditation process.
Over the years, Kentucky has developed strong policies related to professional support and training for teachers. It is one of only 15 states to require and finance mentoring for all novice teachers. It has implemented a performance-based teacher assessment system that includes evaluation by a local team, classroom observations by state-trained assessors and teacher portfolios. And it recently launched major professional-development initiatives aimed at improving elementary school teachers’ ability to identify and assist students struggling in reading and mathematics.

Kentucky was the first state to create an online university, and among the first to:

- Introduce school-based decisionmaking, which provides a formal structure for involving parents and teachers in decisions regarding curriculum, personnel and instruction
- Replace kindergarten through 3rd grade with a “primary school program” that emphasizes team teaching, qualitative assessment and multi-age, multi-ability classrooms
- Establish a statewide P-16 Council to improve communication and cooperation among elementary, secondary and postsecondary education.

Finally, Kentucky has made significant progress toward reducing disparities in funding levels across school districts. In a recent analysis of the impact of KERA, the University of Kentucky’s Center for Business and Economic Research noted that while there are still differences in spending, “these differences are of a smaller magnitude than they were prior to KERA. Further, these differences are unrelated to either income or property wealth – poor districts can be expected to receive as much funding as wealthy districts.”

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The Education Commission of the States (ECS) is an interstate compact created by the states, territories and the U.S. Congress that helps governors, legislators, state education officials and others identify, develop and implement public policies to improve student learning at all levels. A nonpartisan organization, ECS was formed in 1965 and is located in Denver, Colorado.

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