

# Opinion



## A Kansas Viewpoint

### School finance and courts need to stop

The good news is the state Supreme Court finally let go of the 7-year-old school finance lawsuit.

Kansas schools will have more money and superintendents can get on with writing their budgets just as classes begin.

The bad news is the court all but issued an engraved invitation for yet another suit over the school finance law.

Ruling last week, the court said efforts by the Legislature to put \$831 million more into schools over the last two years had met its order requiring legislative action. It declared an end to a 1999 lawsuit filed by medium-size districts led by Salina, Hays and Dodge City.

In a way, the 4-2 decision represented an about-face by a court that had been tough and uncompromising earlier this year. Since then, the justices have had their noses bloodied by the revelation that one of their number was meeting with senators to talk about the case.

The court noted that is wasn't ruling on the constitutionality of the latest version of the school finance law, which depends more heavily on local property taxes. In the past, lawyers have argued that rich districts get richer while children in poor districts get a poor education.

A decision on that wasn't before the court in this suit, the justices said, and "must wait for another day."

Anyone willing to bet the aggrieved school districts won't take up that challenge?

By the time the next lawsuit is done, school finance will have been in court for more than a decade. The lawsuits are corrupting the legislative process and tilting the state's budget toward public schools and away from higher education.

The state's colleges now get less than a quarter of their revenue from state money. They have raised tuition every year, banking on students taking out more loans with easy federal-guaranteed credit.

That's leaving the next generation saddled with huge debt to get an education since, increasingly, a high school degree is not enough.

Other state programs, from highways to prisons, have suffered as well, since the Legislature has held the line on taxes.

The truth is, the court should never have become so deeply involved in spending decisions. The justices' job is to review the law to see whether it meets constitutional standards for fairness, but they shouldn't judge the amount the Legislature sees fit to put into schools.

Dividing up the tax pie is the Legislature's responsibility and duty under the Constitution. In retreating to the issue of how the money is distributed, though, the court may be getting back to its own back yard. That's good. It's willingness to perpetuate school lawsuits is not. This needs to stop somewhere. — *Steve Haynes*

*Steve Haynes is owner of Nor'West Newspapers including the Colby Free Press*

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## The other side

For many people, death is something they don't like to think about, and certainly don't like to talk about it.

I'm one of the fortunate ones for whom talking about death is not a problem. I think that is because of the wonderful experience I had being with my mom during her last five days of life. I literally got to watch her go home to her maker.

I say wonderful because while I would not wish her back for anything, her death taught me so much about life.

It's coming up on the 12th anniversary of my mom's death, a day that ended 75 years here on earth, but started her eternity.

Mom battled diabetes for almost 30 years and survived breast cancer only to succumb to congestive heart and kidney failure.

I'll never forget walking into mom and dad's living room and finding mom in dire need of medical attention. An insistence by me, led dad and me to convince mom to let us drive her to the hospital.

"You promise me you won't take me back to Wichita," mom said as she held my hand while being wheeled into the emergency room.

But knowing she died on the operating table and been resuscitated, and that she didn't want to die in a hospital or nursing home, didn't keep me from telling her I couldn't make that promise.

"You promise," she said again.

For the next five days dad, my brother, sister, sister-in-law and I visited with mom, laughed with mom and cried with mom.

Shortly after midnight on mom's last morning, I stood next to her and initiated the hardest conversation I ever had with my mom.

"Are you ready to go to Jesus?" I asked.



### Jan Katz Ackerman

#### • From Where I stand

"I'm ready when He's ready," she said.

"Don't stay on our account," I said. "Go when He calls you."

Having tucked dad under covers in the hospital's chapel, the rest of us bedded down in the intensive care unit room with mom.

Assisted by an oxygen mask but struggling to breathe, mom looked around the room, pulled the mask away and said, "All my kittens are here with me."

That's the last thing I ever heard my mom say. How appropriate for a mother bearing the last name of Katz.

Later that day, standing beside the hospital bed, I witnessed a miracle.

As our family pastor prayed the Lord's Prayer, mom drew three deep breaths and died.

But that wasn't the end, it was only the beginning.

Skin yellowed and jaundiced from disease, along with gray hair that was equally as tarnished at mom's temples, suddenly was crystal clear and white. I kid you not, it was as if God had reached down from heaven and made them new.

For those of us who know Jesus Christ as our Savior and know we are co-heirs to His kingdom, we can cast all our anxieties on Him because He cares for us, even in death.

A friend and I were recently talking about casting our anxieties on the Lord and she shared this short story with me. It brings home the fact my mom knew exactly what she was doing when she shared her love for Jesus with her family and friends.

"Death"

"Doctor, I am afraid to die," a sick man said turning to his doctor as he prepared to leave the examination room. "Tell me what lies on the other side."

"I don't know," the doctor said very quietly.

"You don't know?" the man asked. "You, a Christian man, do not know what is on the other side?"

The doctor, who was holding the handle of the door, from the other side heard the sound of scratching and whining, and as he opened the door, a dog sprang into the room and leaped on him with an eager show of gladness.

Turning to the patient, the doctor said, "Did you notice my dog? He's never been in this room before. He didn't know what was inside. He knew nothing except that his master was here, and when the door opened, he sprang in without fear. I know little of what is on the other side of death, but I do know one thing, I know my master is there and that is enough."

After sharing that story, my friend said, "May you have peace within you and may you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be."

Like her, I believe friends are quiet angels who lift us to our feet when our wings have trouble remembering how to fly.

*Jan Katz Ackerman is a reporter for the Colby Free Press.*

## Mobile home owners need help

**By Thomas D. Rowley**

For most Americans, homeownership is their single best shot at accumulating wealth.

You put a fraction of the cost down, borrow the rest and pay off the loan over decades—all the while getting a break on taxes and (more often than not) watching the value of your home rise. The results—the countless college educations, business start-ups and retirements funded—speak for themselves. What could be sweeter?

Yet for owners of the nation's 10 million manufactured homes, there's more to a name than meets the eye. It may be home sweet home, but it isn't a "house," and therefore it isn't always a wealth-creating asset. Indeed, manufactured housing units, aka mobile homes or trailers, (and their owners) are often treated as second-class citizens and viewed not as a solution to affordable housing needs but as a problem to be gotten rid of.

Why? Several reasons.

Often as not, mortgage financing isn't available to purchase the units. Instead, buyers are forced to pay cash or take out personal property loans—at much higher interest rates with much less favorable terms. Also without the legal protections and tax deductions that come with home mortgages. In some instances, sub-prime and predatory lenders are the only game in town—not because of the credit worthiness of the borrowers but because of their choice in housing.

Half of manufactured housing owners don't

own the ground beneath their homes. That leads to a whole host of challenges. First, it makes it harder, if not impossible, to get a mortgage. Second, it means they also have to pay rent to the landowners, more and more of whom are absentee investors. And because it can cost thousands to move a unit and there are usually few alternative sites anywhere nearby, most of the homes are mobile in name only. Thus, owners can't vote with their feet.

Consequently, landowners have a captive market and can get away with continually raising the rent, neglecting the grounds and ignoring tenant complaints. All of which makes asset appreciation and wealth creation an illusive goal for people who need it most.

With average cost per square foot at less than half of a site-built unit, manufactured housing is what 30 percent of the nation's low-income homeowners call home. Done right, manufactured housing could make owners out of many more folks who can't otherwise afford a home. (While it's true, according to a report by Consumers Union, that manufactured housing does in some instances appreciate, it's a much riskier investment than site-built homes.)

So much for the itch, where's the scratch?

According to Paul Bradley, vice president of the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund and an expert on the subject, two things are crucial. First, owners of manufactured homes need to own the ground on which they reside. "Land security is number one," says Bradley.

"Homeowners need long term control of the land beneath their house. Period. Without control of the land, you shouldn't expect appreciation."

Second, buyers of manufactured units need access to better financing. The higher interest rates, less favorable terms and lack of legal protections that purchasers run into when mortgages aren't available all strip away equity.

Since 1984, the Fund has been working hard on both fronts. In that year, it helped create the first cooperatively owned park in New Hampshire near Lake Winnepesaukee. Through technical assistance and a \$43,000 loan to help with the down payment, the Fund helped residents organize a cooperative and purchase the land. Since then, the Fund has helped set up more than 70 other co-ops around the state and advised people in other states as well. As but one example of the results, Bradley cites research showing that units in resident-owned parks are selling faster than and at prices averaging 12 percent higher than units in land-lease parks.

"We're seeking to create thriving resident-owned communities," he says.

And they are—by turning what used to be considered a problem into a solution.

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*Thomas D. Rowley is a Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) Fellow. The Rural Policy Research Institute provides objective analysis and facilitates public dialogue concerning the impacts of public policy on rural people and places. [www.rupri.org](http://www.rupri.org).*

### Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

