



## Free Press Viewpoint

### Music in schools worth investment

Over the past few weeks, the *Colby Free Press* has been working on a special section celebrating Music in Our Schools Week, which is this week. The section can be found inside today's paper.

We were asked by several people, potential advertisers and citizens alike, whether this was a political endeavor, a section advocating that school boards not cut any money from music education. Seems there's a rumor going around that the Colby board is going to cut music entirely next year.

The special section is a first for us. Until now, we have not featured music in the way we have sports. It was not meant to be political. It was meant simply as an appreciation of the hard work our student musicians put into their classes, bands and choirs, and to let them know how much we enjoy that work. While we didn't get to every music class in the county (when you add up each grade at each school, you get a very large number) we hope that people will enjoy seeing the photos.

We do feel that music is a valuable program in our schools. Music classes teach reading skills. If you can read a piece of music once and be able to play it well the first time, you can translate that skill to reading a book excerpt on a literature test and being able to answer questions on it. It also teaches teamwork. Every player in the band has to be playing the right notes and in tune for the music to sound good. We could go on and on, but a special section wouldn't be the right way to express it. That is something reserved for the Opinion Page.

The rumor mill has been functioning above and beyond over the past few months as the possibility of more budget cuts looms over us. Every time a school, district or state gets in a budget crisis, someone mentions music. It's entirely normal, but in this case, premature.

Music is in the same boat as every other program. It may get cut, it may not. The district administration has been collecting ideas from staff, teachers, students and the community on ways to balance the budget. When the final numbers are handed down from the Legislature, the administration will bring recommendations to the board that they can approve or not. They will have to do so in an open meeting unless it relates to a specific teacher or staff member.

The Colby board, at least, is looking at everything. Their approach up to now has been to cut a little from many different places, rather than to lop off programs. This approach has served the district well. Even with about \$600,000 cut this year, the schools still provide an excellent education, consistently meeting state standards and winning plenty of awards.

There are certainly things that are more important than music classes, like making sure our kids know how to read and write. We should not compromise basic education for the sake of luxuries, no matter how beneficial.

The board is and should be looking at anything they can do to keep our schools running. We hope that they save music from the chopping block, but we understand that they have many hard choices to make.

— Kevin Bottrell

We encourage comments on opinions expressed on this page. Mail them to the *Colby Free Press*, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701, or e-mail [colby.editor@nwkansan.com](mailto:colby.editor@nwkansan.com). Opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the *Free Press*, its staff or the owners.

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Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

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State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography. Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

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**THE COLBY FREE PRESS** (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

**PERIODICALS POSTAGE** paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

**THE BUSINESS OFFICE** at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

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### Bad teachers not the only problem

Many folks are not pleased with the state of education in America today.

Many in the news media, several Democrats and the overwhelming majority of Republicans in Congress place the blame on teacher unions. So if you find yourself searching for an issue that can bring together diverse personalities on both sides of the political aisle, look no further.

There is widespread acceptance of the idea that teacher unions are hurting American education by protecting bad teachers from getting fired.

The criticism of teacher unions usually is usually coupled with criticism of the Democratic Party, which traditionally gets support from the unions. Criticisms of these unions have some merit.

Gregg Toppo of *USA Today*, reported that Paul Vallas, a public school executive in Philadelphia, used the No Child Left Behind Act to dismiss 350 teachers because they failed to meet minimum standards. He said without the law, he wouldn't have been able to fire the teachers.

Teachers who can't meet minimal requirements should be replaced. And I'm sure there are plenty of examples of unqualified teachers whose jobs have been protected under a union umbrella. But what minimal requirements teachers should be held to and who should draw up these requirements is a question that deserves more public discussion.

Despite the constant vilification of teacher unions, teachers still make next to nothing compared to actors or professional athletes. If teachers are so vital to our country's future, why don't they get paid more? And what



**Andy Heintz**

• Wildcat Ramblings

would teachers in this country be making if it wasn't for unions?

With the rising costs of health care and the high unemployment in today's economy, it's hard to blame teachers for banding together to protect their jobs.

Many people critical of our country's teachers also fail to look at the role parents play, or should play, in helping their child get a good education. Too many hard-working teachers have to play the dual role of teacher and parent in the classroom. To blame teachers for the failures of students who simply don't care about getting an education is terribly unfair and shortsighted.

Unfortunately, many students going to public schools in low-income areas are only there because their parents need them to be someplace when they are at work. It's not that all these kids are lazy or lack motivation. In some ways, they are more grown up than rich kids going to top-notch schools in suburbia because they have to go take care of a little brother or sister when the school day ends while the wealthier students in the suburbs can hang out with their friends.

While parents should shoulder some of the blame for disrespectful students, they can't be entirely blamed for their kids' lack of motiva-

tion. If students know their parents lack the money to send them to college, what incentive do they have to get good grades in high school? It would be great if these kids all decided to do their best anyway, but this just realistic. This why the government should make sure everyone should be allowed to go to college as long as their grades are good enough.

While people can and have led emotionally and financially successful lives without a college education, students with good enough grades should at least be given the option to go to college. To deny someone this solely due to economic circumstances makes a mockery of the American dream.

The entire idea that improving public education in America solely rests upon the quality of teachers is incomplete and overly simplistic. While teachers are certainly a key part of the education system, they are still only a part.

American education will not be improved without fixing our country's poorer communities and neighborhoods. No matter how qualified a teacher is, he or she is going to have a hard time reaching a child from a broken home in an economically depressed area.

The health of our schools will rise only when the impoverished neighborhoods are repaired. And repairing these communities will take a combination of federal, state and local effort, coupled with a supportive community full of families that stress the importance of an education to their children.

*Andy Heintz, a K-State journalism graduate, is sports reporter for the Colby Free Press. He says he loves K-State athletics and fishing, sports and opinion writing.*

### Strong laws would fight drunk driving

**Ignition Interlock Devices:** Last week, Laura Dean-Mooney, Mothers Against Drunk Driving national president, testified in the House Judiciary Committee on SB 368, which weakens current DUI law. She spoke in favor of striking language weakening the ignition interlock law and urged the committee to require interlocks for first-time offenders.

Kansas was one of only a few states to see an increase in drunk driving deaths from 2007 to 2008. In 2008, 131 people lost their lives in alcohol related crashes on Kansas roads. We need to strengthen the law not only for those convicted, but also for those who refuse a breath test. States with the interlock requirement show decreases in repeat offenders.

Current Kansas law brought an increase in compliance rates and decreasing violations and offenders driving illegally while unlicensed and uninsured. Removing this requirement will increase noncompliance and put repeat offenders back on the road. I will encourage the House committee to take a strong stand. I support their goal of increasing the scope in which the interlock devices will be employed.

**Repeal of Religious and Utility Tax Exemptions:** HB 2549, as passed out of the House Tax Committee, would repeal the sales tax exemptions on certain property and services purchased by religious organizations. It would remove the exemption on family gas, water, electricity, coal, wood and heat for residential use, imposing the 5.3 percent sales tax.

I oppose this bill and the removal of these exemptions. Adding to the high tax burden faced by Kansas families is irresponsible.

We will not be able to tax ourselves out of this recession. The state does not have a revenue problem; we have a spending problem. We must demand accountability, since taxes, once levied, rarely go away.

The bill would also remove the sales tax exemption on state Lottery tickets, which could cost the state. For Kansas to participate in multistate drawings such as the Power Ball, the Kansas Lottery agrees to defined ticket prices. By adding the tax, we would be effectively withdrawing Kansas from the multistate drawings and foregoing the additional \$36 million dollars in revenue it bring in every year.

**House Budget Approach:** Some new data



**Jim Morrison**

• Capitol Review

shows the House position is in step with Kansans' concerns over the budget and government spending. An unprecedented 92 percent of voters agree that because federal stimulus dollars are no longer available, Kansas must have a "serious overhaul of the budget." Additionally, 85 percent agree that the state needs to live within its means. Further budget questions revealed similar attitudes:

- 70 percent believe the state spends or wastes money and should or could cut.
- 54 percent named fiscal restraint as the most important budget priority for Kansas.

The House is continuing to identify responsible ways to balance the budget without a blanket tax increase. Now that the House has passed the governor's rescission of current spending, we are focusing on balancing next year's budget without further turmoil to our fragile economy. The House is leading the way on new policy which will restructure how Kansas budgets and spends your tax dollars.

**Energy Efficiency:** This time of year finds many of us thinking about ways to save on energy costs. The state offers several programs to improve the energy efficiency of homes, small businesses, and public buildings. The following is a continuation of my efforts to coordinate with the Kansas Corporation Commission to highlight these programs.

**Weatherization Assistance Program** — This long-standing grant program, operating by the Kansas Housing Resources Corp., targets Kansas households with incomes up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level or 75 percent of the state median income. Eligible Kansans can get weatherization assistance for improvements in single- or multi-family residences, including manufactured homes. The program is open to renters. For information, contact the corporation at (785) 296-4990 or [www.kshousingcorp.org/programs/wap.shtml](http://www.kshousingcorp.org/programs/wap.shtml).

**Facility Conservation Improvement Program** — This program is designed to help public entities — state, cities, counties, and schools — use energy savings performance contracting to get financing for energy-efficiency projects. The state Energy Office operates it. For information, call the office at (785) 271-3170. ([www.kcc.state.ks.us/energy/fcpi/index.htm](http://www.kcc.state.ks.us/energy/fcpi/index.htm)).

**Energy Manager Grant Program** — This new program, operated by the Energy Office, provides coalitions of local governments (cities, counties, school districts) with a \$50,000 annual stipend for up to two years to hire an energy manager. Energy managers will develop both short- and long-term plans for each of the coalition members, with the goal of reducing energy use in both the public and private section. The application deadline for this grant is April 15. For information, download the program description and application ([www.kcc.ks.gov/energy/arra/energymgr.htm](http://www.kcc.ks.gov/energy/arra/energymgr.htm)), or call the Energy Office ([www.kcc.ks.gov/energy/arra/energymgr.htm](http://www.kcc.ks.gov/energy/arra/energymgr.htm)).

In addition to the programs listed above, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development service offers Rural Energy for America Program grants and loans, targeting farmers and small rural businesses. For information, contact David Kramer at [david.kramer@ks.usda.gov](mailto:david.kramer@ks.usda.gov) or (785) 271-2736.

It is an honor to serve you in the House of Representatives. I would be happy to discuss these or any issues with you individually. Please do not hesitate to contact my staff or me with any questions or concerns.

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