



Other Viewpoints

Time for honesty in farm subsidies

The timing might be ripe for scaling back agriculture subsidies in the next Farm Bill.

The call to slash the federal budget is part of it, but at the same time farmers are enjoying both good crop yields and good commodity prices. The average percentage of net farm income from federal conservation and commodity payments has fallen to less than 20 percent in the last three years, compared to 36 percent in the immediately preceding years. And the Farm Bill is up for reauthorization in 2012.

While our natural inclination, living in the breadbasket of the nation, is to continue to support our farmers with subsidies, analyzing this topic requires an honest evaluation of what subsidies accomplish.

No. 1 is dispelling the myth that subsidies are meant to save family farms and preserve rural communities. Not so. Because subsidies are scaled to benefit large farm operations the most, they encourage consolidation and mass production. Quite the opposite of preserving some idyllic rural heritage, subsidies probably have contributed to the demise of Kansas' small rural towns by moving agriculture to large scale and in the process stripping away jobs from the economies of these communities.

Some politicians now at least are honest in acknowledging that subsidies aren't about saving the family farmer but rather about making food cheaper.

We all would prefer to keep prices down in the grocery stores, and maybe Kansas farm subsidies have kept the price down on a loaf of bread and on meat products. Most of our agriculture is grains, and much of it goes into animal feed.

The newest debate is about the price of fresh fruits and vegetables, especially in comparison to processed foods. Maybe what the federal government should be subsidizing more are fruit and vegetable growers.

Or maybe we shouldn't be subsidizing at all and instead allow the free enterprise system to govern the markets.

Crop insurance programs that protect farmers from financial distress because of hail or drought, and conservation programs that protect land and water resources, make some sense. But direct cash payments to farmers deserve some real soul-searching and honest reconsideration.

— The Hutchinson News, via The Associated Press

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Education woes have multiple causes

There is a lot of talk in the media and the government about how the America's education system is falling behind other countries and is in desperate need of reform.

The majority of conservatives and a surprising number of liberals have labeled teachers' unions as one of the biggest obstacles blocking necessary changes in the education system. The two groups' style of criticism does vary at times. Liberals occasionally concede that teachers unions may be only part of the problem, while conservatives generally place most of the blame on the unions.

The "unions are the problem narrative," has also been internalized by the mainstream media who don't seem capable of comprehending, much less investigating, whether our nation's education woes may involve something other than union orthodoxy. The media's acceptance of this framework of thought has led to a national debate that has been confined to a limited spectrum of opinion.

The widespread notion — promoted by our nation's cultural managers — that we are a classless society has undoubtedly played a role in the national debate about America's education system. Since we are allegedly above the class warfare politics practiced in Western Europe, it would be Un-American to blame poverty for our educational woes. The idea that poverty has played a major role in normalizing inequality and dumbing down America would puncture the bootstrap myth that is ingrained in our nations DNA.



Andy Heintz

• Wildcat Ramblings

Since this idea is unthinkable for many of our country's opinion shapers, there has to be someone or something else to blame for what ails our education system. And the teachers' unions are the perfect target because people have cited legitimate examples of how some unions' excessive orthodoxy and bureaucratic nature has led to unworthy teachers (a term that has been used way too casually) being able to keep their jobs despite their failures in the classroom.

For curiosity's sake, let's examine whether teachers' unions are really the only obstacle preventing America from having the model educational system of the world. To appease the bleeding-heart liberals out there, let's see what role, if any, poverty has played in American education.

Joanne Barkan, a writer for the center-left *Dissent Magazine*, cited two of three major international tests — the "Progress in International Literacy Study" and "Trends International Math and Science Study" — that break down poverty rates in each school. The tests are given every five years. She said the most

recent results, 2006, showed that in U.S. schools where the poverty rate was 10 percent to 25 percent, American students ranked first in reading and science. As the poverty rates rose higher, student scores ranked lower in comparison to students in other countries.

Barkan said that as the poverty rate rose higher, student performance ranked lower and lower. Twenty percent of U.S. schools have poverty rates over 75 percent. Barkan said the average ranking of American students reflects this sad reality (my words, not hers).

"The problem is not public schools, it is poverty," she said. "And as dozens of studies have shown, the gap in cognitive, physical and social development between children in poverty and middle-class children is set by age three."

Barkan's assertions are certainly influenced by a certain perspective, but so are the views of the education reformers who have held a near monopoly over elite media opinion. America's education problems will not be solved with simplistic solutions or debates confined within certain limits.

Solving our education crisis will involve parents, teachers, politicians and community leaders working together and coming up with national, state and local solutions.

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.

Empty chicken coops: not fowl play

Used to be every farm in Kansas raised chickens along with cattle and swine. This wasn't just country folks either. Town and city families often raised their own chickens too, especially if they lived in rural areas.

I've been visiting farms across our state for more than 30 years and I can count on one hand the number of working chicken coops I've seen during that period of time.

Things have changed. Today's colossal chicken farms are a sight to behold and a far cry from the small, one-room coops we used when I was a youngster. Modern poultry farming is efficient and allows meat and eggs to be available to consumers in all seasons at a lower cost than free-range production.

While today's automated, mechanized facilities house thousands of birds, our small chicken coop was home to approximately a couple dozen hens. One of my first responsibilities on the farm was to carry the garbage out to the chicken pen and dump it for our flock. This is one of my most vivid memories and as I recall I was not quite four when my mother assigned me this task.

Our white chicken house was no more than 20 feet long by 12-feet wide. It had windows clear across the south side for sunlight in the winter and a breeze when opened in the summer.

These were the days before the phrase, "free-range chickens" had been coined. We didn't keep the chickens cooped up during the day and they could wander around in the fenced in yard picking up gravel, clucking and scratching in the dirt. The chicken houses were really just roosting and nesting places.

Some farms didn't bother to keep their birds in a fence and their chickens could wander anywhere. This created a lot of interesting



John Schlageck

• Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

situations when we visited my Uncle Charlie in Phillips County. You had to be really careful where you stepped in the yard and even the front porch.

Gathering eggs was my second major responsibility when I turned six. This was always a real adventure. Most of the hens didn't make much of a fuss when you coaxed them out of the nest and reached in for the egg. There was always one hen that didn't want you messing with her most cherished possession.

Another chicken-related activity that never made my "top-ten list" was preparing a fresh fryer for a family meal. This didn't involve darting to the grocery store and buying a dressed bird, it was instead stepping into the chicken yard and chasing down the victim, wringing his neck and picking and dressing him.

While I hated to do this, I loved eating a fresh, tender young chicken fried in butter in Mom's cast-iron skillet. Add mashed potatoes, gravy, new-picked beans from her garden and home baked bread. It doesn't get any better.

The most memorable experience I remember was putting an end to the giant red rooster on my Uncle Bernie's farm. This hellish devil weighed in at close to seven pounds. He ruled the roost and most of farm. Whenever we drove over to see my cousins and this beast saw a vehicle pull into the yard, he ran up just like a dog.

But unlike most farm dogs that wag their tails, slobber all over your jeans, shirt or sometimes your face when you step out of your vehicle, this crazy rooster couldn't wait to chase, scratch or claw you with his long black spurs. This demon scared my sister and girl cousins to death. They sometimes cried at the very sight of this evil bird.

We boys steered clear of him as well until I reached the age of eight. That's when we decided to dispatch this bird once and for all. My brother, cousin and I cornered this bird behind the barn one day and gave him the drubbing of his life.

It was him or us, and good triumphed over evil that day. In the process we defended the valor and honor of the fairer sex.

Just like my stories, yesteryear's do-it-yourself system seems hard to imagine when you compare it to today's scientific, automated and efficient procedure.

Back then it took us about 90 days to produce a fryer which would dress out at a pound and a half. Today's modern commercial poultry facility produces a bird nearly twice that size in one-third the time.

And while we thought back then those fryers were mighty tasty and delicious, if we compared one of those with the chickens we buy today at our local supermarket, I'm certain we'd agree our modern birds are much more tender and tasty than those from yesteryear.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

