



Other Viewpoints

Does Kansas need educational reform?

A speaker for the Goldwater Institute in Arizona told Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback and members of the Senate Education Committee, as well as others at a Wichita forum this week, that Kansas could improve its educational performance by following a model set in Florida.

The example he put forth has a number of flaws. But putting those aside, it is curious that we should even need to delve into the question of reform, considering Kansas' rankings in education are relatively good.

Brownback commented on the quality of education during his campaign, and he cited statistics that show 28 percent of Kansas' fourth-grade students failed to achieve a "basic or better" reading score in tests administered to a sampling of students nationwide each year by the National Assessment of Education Progress. NAEP statistics also showed that Kansas' fourth-grade reading scores have essentially remained flat since 1998.

But when you take a broader look at Kansas education, the rankings are not exceptionally poor. In fact, many of them are quite high. And most of them are better than Florida.

As to the flaws in the presentation suggesting we follow Florida's example:

Matthew Ladner of the Goldwater Institute compared all of Kansas' fourth-graders to one subgroup of Hispanic fourth-graders in Florida. This is not an apples-to-apples comparison.

He pointed out that Florida's subgroup improved at a faster rate than Kansas' fourth-graders. Keep in mind, they are gaining ground faster, but their scores are not higher.

It is important that if we are going to consider the possibility of education reform, we look at all aspects of education and not simply a comparison in growth between Kansas fourth-graders and one subgroup in Florida. This is too narrow a comparison and does not give perspective on the overall educational performance in that state.

Kansas outranks Florida in many education measurements. Kansas is ninth in the U.S. for the percentage of students scoring basic or above on four NAEP tests for fourth-grade reading and math and eighth-grade reading and math. Florida ranked 26.

Kansas ranked fifth in the nation for economically disadvantaged students; Florida ranked ninth.

Florida's graduation rate rose from 63.4 percent in 2002 to 66.9 percent in 2008, while Kansas had a smaller increase but still ranked much higher, growing from 77.1 percent to 79.1 percent over the same period.

Florida's drop-out rate improved from 4.4 percent in 2002 to 3.3 percent in 2008, while Kansas' drop-out rate went from 3.2 percent to 2.5 percent.

This kind of performance in Kansas - relatively good and certainly better than Florida's - doesn't seem to call for a drastic measure of reform.

- The Hutchinson News, via The Associated Press

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155 W. Fifth St. (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963
Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

Send news to: colby.editor@nwkanssas.com

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Steve Haynes - Publisher
s.haynes@nwkanssas.com

NEWS

Kevin Bottrell - News Editor
kbottrell@nwkanssas.com

Andy Heintz - Sports Reporter
aheintz@nwkanssas.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor
mballard@nwkanssas.com

Vera Sloan - Society Editor

Shelby Pulkrabek - Society Reporter
colby.society@nwkanssas.com

ADVERTISING

Andrea Bowers, Kathryn Ballard, Tammy Withers
abowers@nwkanssas.com kballard@nwkanssas.com twithers@nwkanssas.com

Kyle Hunter - Graphic Design
khunter@nwkanssas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Robin Tubbs - Office Manager
rtubbs@nwkanssas.com

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator
support@nwkanssas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

Richard Westfahl - General Manager
Lana Westfahl, Jim Jackson, Betty Morris, Jim Bowker, Judy McKnight, Kris McCool

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Boss on the beach; donuts in the office

While the boss is away ... look for disaster to loom.

Actually, it hasn't been too bad. The coldest weather of the year, a round of flu in the office, a few cars that wouldn't start - including mine - nothing that having the boss in charge would really change.

Except a little gloating about the weather on the beach, but why go on vacation if you can't gloat?

I have to confess. The spell of cold we've had this week is just about my favorite kind of weather. It's been cold enough to be "bracing," whatever that means, but not really miserable. Rain and 32 degrees would be a lot worse.

Even better, the sun's been shining. I'm a junky for winter sunshine; something about all that sparkly snow reminds me of a lot of wonderful childhood memories. A whole yard or park or field spread out before me without even one footprint marring it holds a world of fresh possibilities.

Then there are drifts. I admit they are not quite as riveting now as when I was 10 and had snow forts to build, but they are still works of art.

Let us not forget the artificial piles of snow. Low interest to me now, but as a kid there were games of King-on-the-Mountain to play, sometimes involving truly Machiavellian machinations to unseat the champion.

The truly wonderful part of a cold snap, though, is the excuse it provides for comfort food. Ten minutes of hacking at the snow drifts on the sidewalk will earn you a guilt-free cup of hot cocoa. Getting a bug with sneezing, coughing and general misery earns you the in-



Marian Ballard

Collection Connections

dulgence of some home-made chicken soup, which not only offers medicinal and psychological benefits (even thinking about it might make you feel healthier), but tastes good, too. I went all out and made homemade noodles for mine. Dumplings are good, too.

It seemed to be a good time for other snacks, as well. We wound up with donuts in the office. (Who says we can't play while the boss is away?) One day I got hungry for cinnamon rolls, got lazy, and made applesauce cake instead. Seemed to be a great hit, considering it takes about 15 minutes of effort. Anyway, I didn't have to worry about taking leftovers home, and someone even mentioned the recipe.

The cold spell is about over, though, at least here. School's back in session, sidewalks are clear, and most everybody's vehicle is running again. The boss is due back, too. Guess we'll just have to quit playing around for a while.

Although ... I here it's supposed to be cold again next week. So if you find yourself needing some comfort food to help you make it through, here's a recipe.

Applesauce Cake

• Recipe courtesy of Caroline Moody, in an old cookbook called "Raisin' Dough" (for

4-H) put together by the Dawes County, Neb., extension clubs back when phone numbers still had five digits.

- 1/2 cup shortening (or oil)
- 1 1/2 cups sugar
- 2 eggs
- 1 cup unsweetened applesauce
- 2 cups flour (I use 1/2 whole wheat)
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon cloves
- 1 cup chopped raisins (optional)

Cream shortening and sugar, add eggs, beat well. Add applesauce and sifted dry ingredients (I use a wire strainer as a sifter). Beat smooth and fold in raisins.

Bake in a greased and floured (or sprayed) 8- or 9-inch square pan at 350 until a toothpick comes out clean. The recipe says 45 to 60 minutes, but I think that's a bit long.

I never frosted this cake, but feel free. Personally I plan to play with this some, now that I've rediscovered it. Maybe using 1/2 cup oil and more applesauce or some banana. I think dried cranberries or nuts would go well, too. As long as I can give away my experiments, it will be fun to play in the toasty kitchen this winter.

Keep warm. Any enjoy your winter days.

Marian Ballard has collected careers as counselor, librarian, pastor, and now copy editor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas, which are more portable than other stuff.

State of the Union: over budget

To the Editor:

It is a few days after the State of the Union address and all I have to say is, I'm flabbergasted.

In this current economy - dubbed by the President and others, as "the worst economy since the Great Depression" - in his speech on Jan. 25, the President said "we need to invest" in several things. That is just a nicer way of saying "we are going to spend more money" on programs that aren't working.

He also spoke of a freeze on government spending. What he failed to tell the American people is that we now have a \$14.5 trillion debt on this country, which is costing the citizens of America \$4 billion each and every day in interest. And he failed to mention the budget just for this year is - hang on to your wallets - \$1.5 trillion!

Where is the outrage and disgust with what is happening to this country? Where is the embarrassment that America is now the largest debtor nation and we owe money to China, a communist country?

The "freeze" he spoke of will do nothing for this over-bloated, overtaxed and overspent economy. What we need is for government to deflate itself. I have a few ideas on that.

Drop the pay of representatives and senators to the same level as the lowest-paid people on the U.S. totem pole. They have to live on a very tight budget. Put some people back to work by building two bunkhouses, one for the men, one for the women. Let the cafeteria serve their meals, just like the schools - everyone gets the same thing to eat. It won't be steaks or gourmet food every night. If they



Free Press Letter Drop

Our readers sound off

want to splurge on a meal like that, by golly, they can save up for it just like the taxpayers have to do every month.

Make them pay their income taxes, with penalties and interest added. Shoot, put them in jail for noncompliance if you have to, because that's what happens to the little guy, the taxpayer paying Congress' wages. Pay Congress only for the hours actually worked.

Do you realize they get very little work done in an eight-hour day? Do they really need over \$100,000 or up to and over a million dollars a year for their work - a.k.a. greed? How many times have they given themselves a pay raise, when the average American worker has to work his/her fanny off to get a few cents raise? Or gets no raise at all because the boss can't afford to give them a raise?

Cut out zipping across the United States in a "private" (military) jet, supplied and paid for by the taxpayers. Get the President and First Lady to strictly limit their out-of-town "date nights." How many Secret Service personnel have to travel with them? Taxpayers pay their wages, too.

How about letting schools be run by local and state government instead of the federal

government? The bigger the system gets, the more the unions put a damper on teaching things correctly. Consequently, kids tend not to learn what they should to be productive citizens and trustworthy adults.

It's no wonder kids in the U.S. are on the decline in learning. They "go along to get along" to please teachers and over-achieving parents. They need to learn how to reason, discuss, debate, argue the pros and cons of their ideas and use their minds to the fullest to become productive and trustworthy adults. They need challenges and goals set high by local school boards, not by federal officials in Washington, D.C., because the more local education is, the better it can be managed.

I would say more, but at least I hope I have engaged your brain to think on these serious matters that face our nation, our states, and our cities and towns.

Jari Skiles, Colby

Where to write, call

State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer, State Capitol Building, 300 SW10th St., Room 225-E., Topeka, Kan. 66612, (785) 296-7399 ralph.ostmeyer@senate.state.ks.us

State Rep. Rick Billinger, Docking Building, Room 754, Topeka Kan., 66612, (785) 296-7659 rick.billinger@house.ks.gov

Mallard Fillmore

Bruce Tinsley

