



Other Viewpoints

Painful reality cuts into education

In a fiscal crisis, state budget cutters need to go where the money is – and more than half of the state budget goes to public schools.

But understanding the reality doesn't ease the pain of what school districts are going through, or the worry that cutting education so deeply not only is unconstitutional in Kansas, but also counter to the state's efforts to grow its economy and population.

Gov. Sam Brownback continues to say that the state is increasing total dollars for education. That may be true on paper, because of his proposed spending increases for pensions, special education and capital debt payments. But few will see that as the case in the classroom, given that the governor's proposed \$3,780 base aid per pupil for fiscal 2012 would be the lowest since the 1999-00 school year's \$3,770 and, adjusted for inflation, nearing the spending level of 1992.

It's hard to see how such a step backward on per-pupil funding squares with Brownback's assertion, as a candidate and in his State of the State speech, that educating children is the state's "primary function." Nor does it show any respect for multiple legislative studies calling for more money – or for the Kansas Supreme Court's 2006 resolution of the school-finance case, which anticipated that state funding for schools would increase substantially and steadily.

Wichitans started to become aware of the stakes recently, as the Wichita school board tentatively approved one-day furloughs for nonteacher employees and relocation of some programs, and also kept some bond projects on hold.

What's sobering is that these "Phase 1" savings actually save just \$887,000 – a long way from the \$30 million in possible cuts in state aid to the district.

"The really hurtful cuts are yet to come," said board President Connie Dietz.

A one-day furlough for teachers and paraprofessionals would save another \$1.2 million, underscoring how much of a district's money goes to its classroom teachers. Because of that, the United Teachers of Wichita's proposal for a 3 percent salary increase and other additional pay doesn't fly.

In a recent budget update, Superintendent John Allison made a point that needs to resonate for state lawmakers as well as school staff: "We can't and won't tell our children that we'll get back to them when finances are more stable. They need us today to make sure they can grow and learn to their fullest potential."

Other doings in Topeka related to education are worthy of public attention, including a proposed constitutional amendment giving the Legislature full authority to decide how much school funding will suffice, and another to abolish the state Board of Education and Kansas Board of Regents and let the governor appoint a Cabinet-level education secretary.

What's going on is so important to the state and its communities that people need to get engaged now, not wait until their kids' class size has doubled or a valued district program is gone.

– The Wichita Eagle, via the Associated Press

Write us

The Colby Free Press encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of general interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address of the author.

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You never know what you might see

You see some unusual things at Oasis at night.

I'm an evening coffee drinker, something that is a little unusual around here. I like to brew my own coffee (sometimes decaf, sometimes not) at all hours of the afternoon or evening. Not every day, mind, just when the whim strikes me. It usually doesn't keep me up when I want to sleep.

I also like to make evening trips to Starbucks. They close at 10 p.m., and sometimes my visit comes down to the wire. Sometimes I do it 'cause I'm bored, sometimes 'cause I'm craving a white chocolate mocha. Sometimes – as was the case last Monday night – I like to go after I get done covering an evening event for the paper, a tasty reward for working after hours.

There's usually only two or three other people there when I make one of these late-evening excursions; sometimes its just me.

The things you see out there during the day are routine – travelers walking their dogs, people pulling in with horse trailers, the very friendly Rastafarian guy on the cleaning crew. But at night, things get far more interesting.

A few weeks ago, as I was getting in my car, several highway patrolmen drove up and parked. One opened his trunk and pulled out an assault rifle. My knowledge of firearms comes mainly from video games and movies, so I know an assault rifle when I see one. I think he was showing it to his buddy – another patrolman who had parked next to him – but with a smile I couldn't help but wonder if he was doing it just to mess with passers by: "Hey Joe, want to freak out the guy in that silver car over there? Hang on I'll get my gun."



Kevin Bottrell

• Simple tricks and nonsense

Last Monday, after an enjoyable time taking pictures of the U.S. Army jazz band (those guys can really wail), I headed down the road to Starbucks. I got my coffee and as I was leaving, I saw a thin, tall, dark-skinned man crouched by the corner of the building. The strangest thing was he had his shoes off, an unusual thing on the concrete sidewalk. My instinct was to give him a wide berth and lock my doors as soon as I got in the car, which I did.

Then I looked back in my rearview mirror and it suddenly became clear to me what this man was doing. I could see him kneeling on the sidewalk and touching his head to the concrete. He was praying. It was unmistakably the Salah, or ritual prayer that Muslims have to do five times a day.

That changed my outlook. Suddenly he was no longer a crazy man; instead he was a religious man, a devout man praying east towards Mecca.

Say what you will about Islam in general, and you could say plenty, but right then and there my instinct was that this man was not a threat to me. I felt he was more of a threat when I thought he was a crazy guy hunkered in a corner at a gas station. Now I was simply intrigued. How had a Muslim come to this cor-

ner of Kansas where, to my knowledge, few if any Muslims reside? If I had to guess, I'd say he just passing through.

I had not really encountered a Muslim since I was in college at Colorado State University. Back then, I had taken an Islamic history class, a fascinating subject, and integral to the history of the western world. There were two Muslim students in the class, and I'll never forget one day when our professor was outlining a few Jewish practices and after he explained one point, one of the two raised a hand and said, "They do that, too? Why are we fighting these people." I hope it was a profound moment for everyone in the class. It certainly was for me.

Since then, living and working in small towns in Wyoming and Kansas, I've not had much occasion to deal with Muslims.

I know the fear that this particular religion breeds in people, and I know why. But I saw no threat from those Muslims then, and none from the man I saw Monday night.

Could he have been pausing to pray while smuggling explosives across the country or some other nefarious purpose? I suppose so. I chose not to disturb him and went on my way, so I know nothing about him. I've come to think he was simply another in a string of benign unusual occurrences that you encounter when you visit a gas station on a busy Interstate at night.

I wonder what I'll see next.

Kevin Bottrell, news editor of the Colby Free Press, is a Colorado State University graduate who believes that the middle road is often the high one. Contact him at kbottrell@nwkansas.com

Cows take obscurity in stride

Talk to farmers, stockmen and ranchers – most will tell you how much they love their cows.

Problem is, this humble and in most cases easy-going beast rarely receives the praise associated with the noble show horse or one of the so-called smartest creatures, the squealing pig.

No one extols the virtues of this contented creature that spends her days quietly grazing and eating grass. We've all watched movies about horses – "My Friend Flicka" – and pigs – "Babe" – but mostly, cows are considered boring and ignored by Hollywood, the media and the public at large.

Still, cows are not whiners. They take their obscurity in stride and rarely complain about their circumstances. They spend days and nights under the stars without a tent or blanket and only their coat to keep them warm. They have to hoof it across the pasture just to get a drink of cold water.

But hey, I'm not here to say I feel sorry for the cow community. Confident and quiet, it is not their way to ask for preferential treatment.

Spend time with a herd of cows, and you'll soon discover they are indeed spiritual beings. They live their entire lives in service to mankind.

Behind that seemingly blank stare rests a knowing glint that suggests, "Go ahead. Make fun. I spend all day eating and sleeping. You're the one with high blood pressure and cash-flow problems."

Cattle occupy a unique role in human history, domesticated beginning with the Stone



John Schlageck

• Insights

Kansas Farm Bureau

Age. Some are raised for meat (beef cattle), dairy products (cows) and hides (both).

They are also used as draft animals and in certain sports. Some consider cattle the oldest form of wealth, and cattle rustling, consequently one of the earliest forms of theft.

Dairy cows are referred to as the foster mothers of the human race because they produce most of the milk that people drink. They provide 90 percent of the world's milk supply.

The best cows may give approximately 25 gallons of milk each day. That's 400 glasses. Cows in this country give an average of 2,000 gallons of milk per year. That's more than 30,000 glasses every year.

Beef cattle supply more than 30 different cuts of meat, including the heart, tongue and what we grew up calling mountain oysters – a male private part. You gotta admit, that's meaningful giving.

Another gift from the bovine community is leather that comes from their hides. We use it for boots, belts, baseballs, suitcases, purses, wallets, easy chairs and jackets.

Cows also shine in the rodeo arena or as spokesmodels in advertising. Borden's Elsie the Cow has graced this company's dairy

products for eons. And who hasn't seen the skydiving cows on their television screen?

Snorting bulls symbolize a healthy stock market and a Hereford cow pioneered space travel. Every kid knows about the cow that jumped over the moon.

Milk, ice cream, cheeseburgers or that fine leather purse – think about it. Where would we be without our cows?

On any given day, a cow often does more for us than our friends, neighbors, in-laws or even our elected officials. Cows deserve a roaring round of applause and recognition for a job well done.

Anyway, I'd much rather thank a cow and wear a pair of leather boots than sport a mink coat and thank a varmint. I know I'd rather drink milk from a cow than milk from a mink. Enough said.

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.

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

