



## Other Viewpoints

### Kansas stuck with 'No Child'

It wasn't surprising that federal officials denied a request by Kansas for a temporary waiver from the No Child Left Behind law. But it is disappointing that Kansas public schools have to keep chasing an impossible standard.

Kansas State Board of Education chairman David Dennis of Wichita wrote a letter to the U.S. Department of Education in February and a followup letter in April asking for the waiver. Kansas wanted the annual targets for reading and math tests to be held at 2009-10 levels until it implements new Common Core achievement standards.

But Michael Yudin, U.S. deputy secretary of education, told Kansas officials last week that the best way to assist states was for Congress to reauthorize and reform the law, not to grant Kansas a waiver.

"I'm very disappointed in this decision," Dennis said in a statement, adding that he hoped Congress would "understand the urgency involved for our schools" and heed President Obama's call to reauthorize the law by the start of the next school year.

Getting a waiver was a long shot. Still, the U.S. Education Department granted the McPherson school district a waiver earlier this year to enact its own testing standards, which raised some hope for flexibility.

Under the law, districts are required each year to increase the percentages of students who are proficient in reading and math. By the 2013-14 school year, 100 percent of students are supposed to be proficient — a statistically impossible standard.

Already, 254 of 1,380 Kansas schools, or 18 percent, aren't hitting their yearly progress targets. Nationally, 33 percent of schools failed to hit the annual goals in 2008-09, the most recent numbers available, according to the Center on Education Policy.

"Unfortunately, as the targets move closer to 100 percent over the next couple of years, we'll begin to see more and more schools miss the mark," Kansas Education Commissioner Diane DeBacker said in a statement.

Though the No Child law has focused needed attention and resources on groups of children who might have been left behind, the 100 percent mandate is unrealistic and, ultimately, counterproductive. Congress needs to act soon to reform the law or, better yet, to scrap it.

— *The Wichita Eagle, via The Associated Press*

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roberts.senate.gov/public/

**U.S. Sen. Jerry Moran**, Russell Senate Office Building, Courtyard 4, Washington, D.C. 20510 (202) 224-6521. Fax (202) 225-5124 moran.senate.gov/public/

**U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp**, 126 Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. (202) 225-2715 or Fax (202) 225-5124. Web site: huelskamp.house.gov

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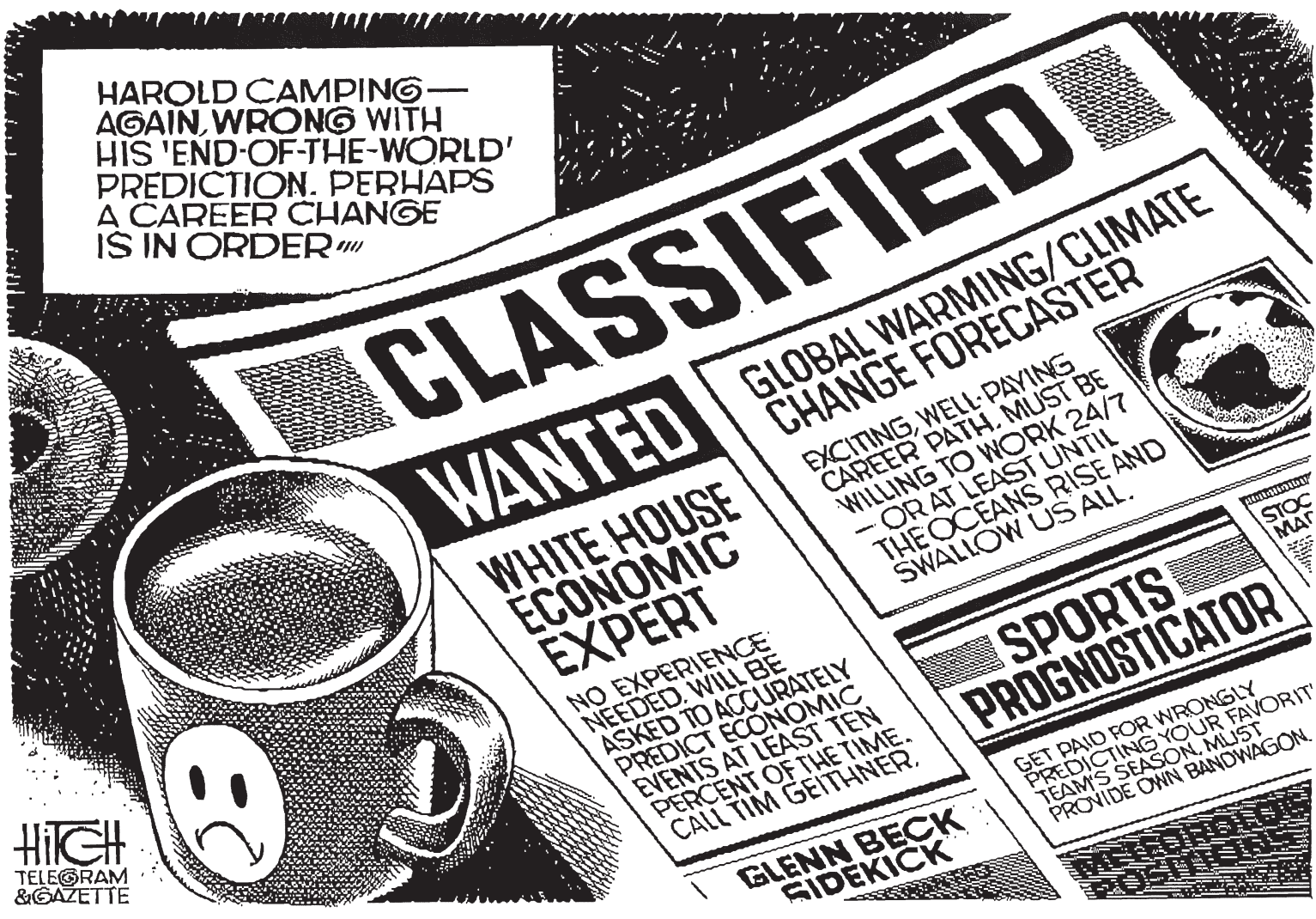
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THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by NorWest Newspaper, 155 W. 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.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby, Thomas County and Oakley: three months \$35, one year \$85. By mail to ZIP Codes beginning with 676 and 677: three months \$39, one year \$95. Elsewhere in the U.S., mailed once per week: three months \$39, one year \$95. Student rate, nine months, in Colby, Thomas County and Oakley, \$64; mailed once per week elsewhere in the U.S. \$72



### Can you fathom these dimensions?

We were out walking in a half-finished subdivision near an old race track the other day.

Steve was pointing out how you could still see starting area, the turns and the finish line, even though the track has been gone for about 50 years and there are houses built on parts of it.

I have to admit it looked like long rows of dirt to me, but I know there had been horse racing there in the past because I've seen pictures of the track.

Just before the beginning of the big oval track there was a long straight stretch.

Steve was wondering why they needed that stretch and then decided that if they were running a longer race it might add a furlong or two to the course.

"By the way," I asked, "what's a furlong?"

Steve admitted he had no idea. It's just a unit of measure used in horse racing. We had no idea how long it is.

That brought up other obscure units such as hands, stones and fathoms.

"I can't fathom fathoms," Steve said. I tried to hit him.

Again we both knew that horses are measured in hands. Stones is an old-fashioned weight measurement and fathoms is only used to measure the depth of water.



**Cynthia Haynes**

#### • Open Season

But, again we had no idea how these compared to the units we normally use.

So I decided to look them up.

No children, I did not go to Wikipedia. I went to Merriam Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, tenth edition, which proudly announces on its red front the it is "The Voice of Authority."

So how long is a furlong?

According to Webster's it's, "A unit of distance equal to 220 yards (about 201 meters.)"

Steve Googled the answer and got 1/8 of a mile plus the information that Merriam Webster says it's 220 yards.

Next up, how high is a hand?

That took a little while because everything from humans to bananas have hands, but finally I found it: "A unit of measure equal to four inches (10.2 centimeters) used especially for the height of horses."

So on to stone. If Steve weighs 20 stone, does he need to go on a diet?

Webster's says that a stone is, "any of several units of weight; esp. an official British unit equal to 14 pounds (6.3 kilograms.)"

So by my math, that would make a 20-stone man weigh 280 pounds and he certainly should go on a diet unless he's really tall or plays professional football.

Our last question: how deep is a fathom.

Our friend Webster's says that this is "A unit of length equal to six feet (1.83 meters) used esp. for measuring the depth of water."

So there you have it, more esoteric measurement knowledge than you ever wanted.

However, Webster's could not answer that age-old question, "How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood."

For that, we'll just have to check Wikipedia, or maybe Steve could Google it for us.

*Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of NorWest Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes @ nwkansans.com*

### School consolidation has long history

When Kansas was admitted to statehood in 1861, we already had 200 school districts "up and running" — mostly in eastern Kansas. Each elementary school was its own district, governed by a five-member board of education. By the end of the 1800s, there were more than 9,000 school districts in Kansas. New high schools, each also with a school board, created a mesh of overlapping districts.

In 1901, the Kansas Legislature authorized the first school consolidation, a voluntary process. Districts could vote to unify and the state would pay for the transportation of students. Elected county superintendents had authority to combine adjoining districts with less than five students each.

After World War II, the Kansas Legislature forced reorganization of the school districts in an attempt to provide equity in financing. Over 8,000 elementary districts merged to less than 5,000 before the law was ruled unconstitutional in 1947.

In the late 1950s, the Kansas Legislature contracted with the University of Minnesota to survey Kansas schools. There were now about 2,800 school districts, many still operating one or two-room schools in rural areas. Only 238 offered the full range of grades, kindergarten through high school.

The study recommended each school district have 1,200 students in the 13 grades and be centered on a county. But many rural counties lacked that number, and the Legislature allowed other plans to be submitted. At the time, the state provided 22 percent of district budgets, local taxes 74 percent and the federal money just 3 percent.

Kansas's next unification law was in 1963. Each county formed a planning commission, except Johnson County got two. Instructions were to form one or more school districts per county, each with 200 or more square miles of territory and at least \$2 million in property valuation.



**John Richard Schrock**

#### • Education Frontlines

A statewide vote approved the recommendation of 311 unified schools districts. At the same time, the position of state superintendent was eliminated and our current 10-member elected state Board of Education was created. It in turn hires a commissioner of education to lead the department.

By 2002, the Legislature had commissioned a \$200,000 study from Augenblick and Myers. The firm found Kansas has 1 percent of the nation's pupils, 1.6 percent of the nation's schools and 2.1 percent of the nation's school districts. They found districts that are too large, such as Wichita and Shawnee Mission, but also 50 school districts that were too small. They recommended options dropping the number of districts to either 284 or 255. At the same time, two Kansas superintendents, Ken Kennedy at Pratt and Sharol Little at Manhattan, used a model similar to regional hospitals and clinics, to propose consolidating into a few regional school districts. Neither plan was adopted by the Legislature.

These last few years have seen the steady drumbeat of rural school consolidation (from 303 to now 293) as smaller schools lose students and can no longer afford to provide a full curriculum. By statute, schools that consolidate get to keep their higher pre-consolidation funding for several years — a provision intended as an incentive to consolidate. Ironically, this also prevents any immediate savings: if we had known the 2008 economic crisis was coming, major school consolidation earlier in the decade would have helped.

With no bold leadership, and a system that makes "consolidation" political suicide, we have seen the gradual forced consolidation of small rural school districts by bankruptcy. The resulting gerrymandered districts will lack the logic of a larger intelligent plan. The agonizingly slow process prevents any substantial savings.

Even with tax incentives for out-of-state folks to move to rural Kansas, we cannot expect to turn around this population shift, especially with young families with schoolchildren. Consolidation is inevitable and should center around school quality, recognizing that some loss of community identity when high schools are merged is inevitable.

If only there was a consolidation czar that everyone could trust, who could build an acceptable consensus, district by consolidated district. But short of such a "Jimmy Stewart" figure, Kansas is destined to slouch along in perpetual indecision and political timidity.

*John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.*

### Write us

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### Mallard Fillmore

#### • Bruce Tinsley

