

Other Viewpoints

Replacing plan risks employees

A recommendation to convert the state employee retirement system to a 401(k) plan seems like a reasonable move, but state officials need to realize that the pensions currently guaranteed by the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System are a significant benefit for state employees.

If the state is going to make its retirement plan more like those offered by private businesses, it also may have to provide salaries and other benefits that make state jobs more competitive with those offered in the private sector.

A state commission studying the Public Employees Retirement System situation recommended recently that teachers and other government workers hired after June 30, 2013, and those who aren't vested in the system by that date, would be required to contribute 6 percent of their wages to a 401(k) retirement account. The state would contribute an amount equal to 1 percent of the employee's salary and would increase its contribution by a half-percent each year until it tops out at 5 percent.

To its credit, the 13-member retirement system commission, including five state legislators, also voted to recommend that legislators be covered by the same retirement plan as state employees, which will represent a drastic reduction in pension benefits for state lawmakers.

The Public Employees Retirement System commission was formed to come up with a plan to deal with a long-term funding challenge for state pensions. The pensions are funded by contributions from employees and employers and, like all pension funds, fell on hard times after the economic downturn in 2008. The situation was made worse because of the state's failure to keep up with fund contributions.

It's essential, of course, that the state make good on its commitment to state employees who are vested in the current system. Many of those employees will tell you that the promise of a Public Employees Retirement System pension kept them in state jobs that didn't pay as much as they could have made in the private sector. The state has promised them that pension, and they should receive it.

Going forward, the state also will have to deal with the fallout from the loss of the traditional pension fund. A 401(k) plan is more standard in today's business world, but that means the state will have to compete with private business to get top employees. The portability of 401(k) funds also may mean that employees will be more willing to leave a state job in search of a better position in the private business. The state may find that some employees were more loyal to their pension benefits than to their jobs.

The 401(k) matching package being proposed by the state is more generous than what is offered by many private employers, and it is a sustainable model that will reduce the burden on state taxpayers to make up for any future investment losses in the fund. It's true that the plan injects an element of risk into state employees' retirement planning, but it also gives them more power over how their retirement funds are invested as well as more freedom to move to another employer if they wish.

It's a real-world system already used by many employees in the private sector. Putting the state and its workers on the same footing with private business and employees doesn't seem like a bad move.

— Lawrence Journal-World, via The Associated Press



"IF NOT LIKING A NEWS STORY MEANS YOU SHOULD CANCEL THE PAPER, DOES NOT LIKING A TV SHOW MEAN YOU SHOULD TURN OFF THE ELECTRICITY?"

Sister's question changed Christmas

My little sister asked Santa Claus a question back in 1941 that changed the way this Man of the Plains looked at Christmas from that time going forward. And at 77, I've done a lot of forwarding.

Our home was in the 300 block of West 15th Street in Hays, north of the former St. Anthony's Hospital. A beautiful Christmas tree, a live tree, I might add, with colorful bulbs and silver tinsel hanging from each branch, was the centerpiece of our living room.

On this particular Christmas eve, my older siblings were again looking forward to Santa's arrival, not for themselves, but for the reaction of the three youngest members of the family: Mary, myself and Jim. We were 4, 7 and 8, and Santa Claus was a big deal to Mary and I. Jim was a question mark.

The older siblings, Norbert, Donald, Dean, Dolores (Tootsie), Gene and JoAnn, were non-believers of this guy dressed in red and white, wearing black boots, flying all over the place in a sleigh guided by reindeer, and with a white beard blowing around his face and obstructing his vision, but they did us youngsters the courtesy of not revealing what they knew!

We gathered around the tree on the Christmas Eve in question, and under the direction of Dad, organist and choir director for many years at St. Joseph's Church on West 13th Street. He played the piano while we sang carols, awaiting the "Ho! Ho! Ho!" of Santa Claus.

The stage was set. The presents were colorfully wrapped and placed under the Christmas tree. We always opened our gifts on Christmas Eve, not Christmas morning. The voice in my head teased me by asking: "Hey, Tommy, if Santa is the one who brings presents, why are they already under your tree?"

A few days before that Christmas Eve, I told brother Jim what the voice in my head was saying. Jim, I learned, was not a firm believer, thanks to his buddies. Some of them told him



Tom Dreiling

• Man of the Plains

that Santa was just imaginary. But they warned him not to let on, because if he did, there might be no presents under the tree for him. Jim wasn't about to take that chance.

With nine kids and Mother and Dad, the bounty under the tree was modest. There were gifts that fit the requests of the three little people in the family, while the big kids were to receive clothing and paper sacks with homemade fudge, store-bought hard candy, peanuts, a popcorn ball and an orange or apple.

Santa knew exactly when to bang on our door and holler, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" Dad acted really surprised, and hesitated a minute or two before letting him in. The tall, skinny-looking, worn-out Santa asked that old traditional question, "Were you good boys and girls this year?" Like a chorus, we all shouted, "Yes, Santa!" Jim was the loudest shouter! Santa then handed out the gifts from under the tree. As this was going on, the voice in my head said, "See, Tommy, he didn't bring you anything again. Your Mom and Dad bought that stuff!"

The voice was beginning to make sense. Little sister Mary was standing next to Santa and looking him over, head to toe. In a polite voice and as sincere as she could be, she asked, "Santa, why are you wearing Daddy's slippers?" Santa, obviously not prepared for that question, cleared his throat a couple of times, managed to yell, "Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!" and exited the place like it was on fire!

That was the Christmas that sealed the deal for me: there was no Santa! The voice in my

head said, "Well, Tommy, welcome to the club!" It took Mary a couple more years before she came to terms with the Santa issue.

Oh, who was wearing Dad's slippers on that Christmas eve in 1941?

All these years later, I still don't know.

With Herman Cain no longer in the running, who will he endorse? That's a no-brainer; it'll be Newt Gingrich. Those two seemingly have a lot in common, especially when it comes to shopping, "lady shopping," that is.

Snippets

"...You keep forgetting the Republicans have three parties: Republican, Tea Party and Grover Norquist'sers..."

"Thanks for the laugh - Motel vs. Mortuary! I know you probably won't use this, but your columns add so much to our newspaper's opinion page..."

"Looks like the Republicans are going to ignore the smartest presidential candidate of the lot: Jon Huntsman! ...They will give us either the old, overweight, worn out, political tire named Newt Gingrich or the gritty Mitt Romney.... Just not serious about winning."

"Strictly from a nonpolitical person's perspective, Barack Obama's days are numbered as occupant of The White House..."

"...Is Sarah Palin still alive?"

Snippets to milehitom@hotmail.com. Please hold them to no more than three sentences. No signature necessary.

Because this is my last column of 2011, I take this opportunity to wish you a Merry Christmas, or Happy Holidays, and a Happy New Year!

Tom Dreiling of Denver is a former publisher of the Colby Free Press and The Norton Telegram, and a former long-time editor of the old Goodland Daily News.

Testing pushes out student teachers

Spring testing season is approaching. Schools and teachers again face penalties if their student scores do not continue to rise.

The result: more school districts are saying "no" to requests to place student teachers.

This unexpected consequence of No Child Left Behind legislation and testing fever first appeared in Tennessee. That state was "lucky" enough to receive \$500 million in the national Race to the Top grant competition. The strings attached to that money forced Tennessee to require teacher tenure to be tied to ever-rising student test scores.

Each year, principals will evaluate teachers on their students' learning gains. Tennessee teachers will lose tenure status if they score low two years in a row. To gain tenure, a teacher must score at the top two years in a row.

With their pay and jobs dependent on student scores, teachers and administrators are no longer gambling that student scores might drop where they are training a student teacher. In an Associated Press report, a spokesperson for the Williamson County School District in Tennessee explained why schools cannot risk taking a student teacher: "It's your classroom, and you are being evaluated based on your students' performance."

While Kansas has not yet tied pay and tenure to test scores, Kansas is being required to move the last steps toward 100-percent-pro-



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

ficient-by-2014 under No Child Left Behind. The only hope for relief from this insane goal is to apply for a waiver. U.S. Department of Education Secretary Duncan has made it clear that any waivers will require a state to tie teacher performance and tenure to student scores. It is not certain if enough Kansas schools will agree to a performance pay system so Kansas can apply for a waiver in January.

Either way, Kansas is headed for gun-to-the-head teaching. Student teaching will be pushed aside.

Already in Kansas, teacher preparation programs are finding it more difficult to place student teachers for spring 2012. Spring is testing season and more schools are rejecting student teacher requests. The drill-and-kill test preparation will reach fever pitch after students come back from Christmas vacation. And every school lives in fear of not making "AYP."

Regardless of effort, more schools will fail to reach the goalpost that continues to move

closer to requiring 100 percent. Secretary Duncan predicts "failed schools" will reach 80 percent.

The solution to this insanity does not rest with waivers or value-added schemes.

The problem is overtesting. And the solution rests in the hands of Kansas parents.

Kansas parents of schoolchildren have the right to opt their children out of state assessments. If the number of students participating in the Kansas testing drops below 95 percent, the data are no longer considered valid for No Child Left Behind.

Across the country, from Washington State to Florida, parents have the opportunity to bring an end to the test madness and force the federal educationists to stop treating our children as lab rats. In some states, parents do not have the right to opt out because the high school diploma is tied to the exit exam.

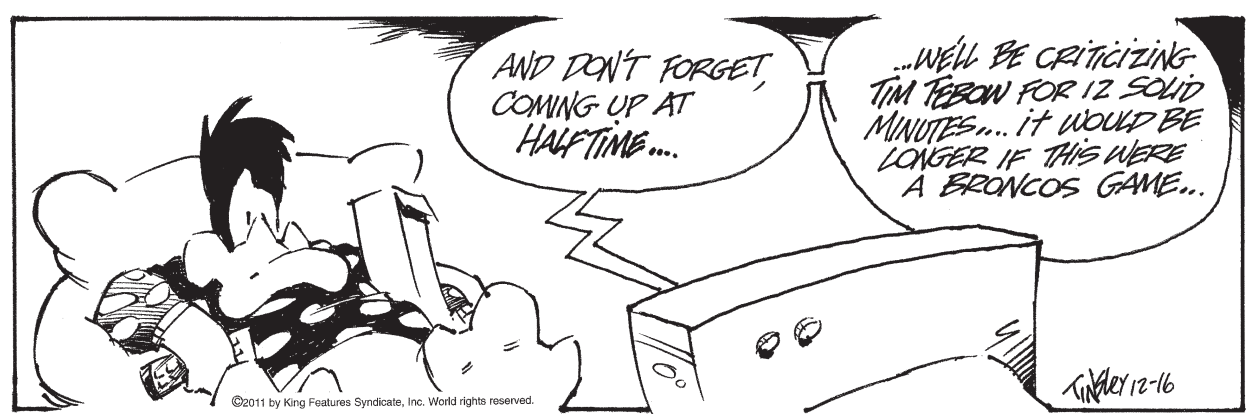
But in Kansas, parents can end this madness, rescue their children from test oppression, and let a new generation of student teachers get back into the classroom.

This spring, tell your school that your child will not be taking the Kansas assessments.

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.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley



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