



Other Viewpoints

Let counties control elections

Sedgwick County is still awaiting Secretary of State Kris Kobach’s report on why the Sedgwick County Election Office took forever to tally votes Nov. 6, and wondering whether there will be any accountability for that fiasco. But one worthy idea already has emerged from Topeka – letting locals pick their own election commissioners.

Under current law, each county with more than 130,000 residents – Johnson, Wyandotte and Shawnee as well as Sedgwick – must rely on the secretary of state to appoint their election commissioner. In the other 101 counties, election oversight is among the jobs of elected county clerks.

Under a bill proposed last week by Democratic leaders, county commissioners would choose the election commissioners in the four most populous counties. In proposing local control, Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley, D-Topeka, said he wouldn’t oppose letting voters in the large counties elect their election commissioners. Whatever it takes, many in Sedgwick County would agree, especially if it avoids more nights like Aug. 7 and Nov. 6, when the county trailed the state and, in the case of the presidential election, the entire nation, in getting its votes counted and results released.

Kobach, who appointed Sedgwick County Election Commissioner Tabitha Lehman in 2011, argued last week that the current system provides accountability through his ability to replace the election commissioners in the large counties, and that he now can quickly and directly coordinate procedures and policy with those counties.

Maybe Sedgwick County will see it Kobach’s way once his report on the Nov. 6 election is released later this month, if changes are made accordingly. But as it is, voters and county officials can do nothing but complain that Lehman appears unable to handle the job of running elections and delivering timely results.

And the clock is ticking toward the Feb. 26 primary to choose municipal and school board candidates. Kobach must ensure his appointee gets it right this time.

While we’re on the subject of Kobach’s authority: One thing the 2013 Legislature should not do is expand it to include prosecution of election crimes. Though Kobach persuaded the Legislature to pass laws requiring photo ID to vote and, as of January, proof of citizenship for voter registration, he has failed to demonstrate that Kansas has a voter-fraud problem or that county attorneys need his help prosecuting election crimes. And if there is one thing Kansas’ crusading secretary of state does not need, it’s more power.

That said, Democratic lawmakers are overreaching with a second proposal aimed at curbing Kobach’s moonlighting legal work. The past two Sedgwick County election nights alone are enough to cast doubt on whether Kobach is on top of his state duties. But a law limiting some state officials to 10 hours of work a week outside of their official duties sounds like an extreme measure – and one unlikely to gain favor anyway in the sharply conservative 2013 Legislature.

Trustworthy elections should be a bipartisan goal, though. Lawmakers can build and safeguard trust in future elections in the state’s large counties by giving them control over the choice of election commissioners.

– The Wichita Eagle, via the Associated Press

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Finally, home for the holidays

Finally.

Such a simple word, but when you have waited months to hear it, it seems like a much bigger word. The finally refers to closing on our home shortly before Thanksgiving.

As the countdown to closing began, I almost wanted to hold my breath for fear some small thing would raise its ugly head, as they had so many times in this process. This time, the small thing kept quiet and closing came off without a hitch.

When we all sat down to sign the paperwork, it was quite a crowd. Amazing how many folks had a hand in this adventure – and how senses of humor still were intact. I probably looked like the village nutcase with a smile that big, but I figured if anyone didn’t like it, they would just have to get over it.

I am still smiling. The first time I drove into OUR driveway, I felt a sense of calm that hadn’t been there before.

Now for the fun part. All those boxes now occupying the garage need to be unpacked and put away. Yikes, who knew how much stuff I had. Not only do they have to be unpacked, but the things in them need put in their proper place. So, where should this go? That goes inside or basement. Upstairs or down? It is a lot of fun finding a home for all the stuff we seem to have accumulated over the years.

To say my tastes are eclectic is being kind. The Painted Ponies go with the beanie babies of the Cow Project and the Ernst Ulmer print



Sharon Friedlander

• Musings

goes over the fireplace with them both. Dusting will be a full-time project, but who cares? I can now sit and enjoy them every day.

The stack of boxes is not going down very fast, and I want it done so I can have weekends free again. I am also getting very tired of toting boxes from the garage to the house and the empties to the basement. Guess I can cancel that StairMaster from Santa this year. Maybe it will be a new trend, “moving in for fitness.”

Being a homeowner is exciting, and the “honey-do” list is increasing. Spring will not be here fast enough for either my husband or me. There are so many little things that we would like to do to the outside of the house, and we are anxious to start. Maybe we will throw a paint-the-trim or gardening party, complete with beer, wine and food. Any excuse to get help. Maybe I did read Tom Sawyer too many times, but it’d be worth a try.

I hope my new neighbors will forgive the lack of Christmas lighting this year. I promise I’ll make it up next year. I have found the decorations, but can’t get to them yet, so they’ll

just have to wait. Maybe I’ll start a new trend – lights in February. If it catches on we could become famous for thinking outside our box.

The dog has probably settled in best of all. He has all his favorite spots picked out and he really seems to enjoy being able to cruise the front yard while looking for new friends. If you see him bouncing toward the front fence, feel free to laugh. He looks like a dog-deer with the way he bounces with his front legs up. It just looks goofy. When we laugh at him, he doesn’t seem to take offense. He just looks at us as if he is saying “what?”

I love to follow him up and down the stairs. I have a hard time controlling two feet and he flies down in a rolling motion that defies logic. Four furry flying feet and never a misstep. I envy that coordination! I guess I will just have to be content with two feet and get over it.

The “honey-do” list will grow all winter for all those projects that will be outside in the spring. The front porch will have the swing in full use and the folks sitting there will be happy to live in Colby by April, so all the hard work will have been worth it. In the meantime, maybe an unpacking party would work. See you on the porch!

Sharon Friedlander, publisher of the Colby Free Press, enjoys reading, hot rods and critters. Contact her at sfriedlander @ nwkansas.com.

Ending cursive means a slippery slope

A professor at Shandong Normal University in Jinan, China, confided to me over lunch after my morning lectures at his college last year, “Our students are forgetting how to write!”

The culprit was the new electronics. The Chinese-language input system for handheld smartphones as well as for computers uses an efficient system to prompt the next-most-likely character. For instance, you want to start a message with “I want....” You key in the sound of the word for “I” and the many Chinese characters that have that sound are lined up with the most common word first. You merely press 1 and that complex character is selected. But before you can key in the sound for “want,” the next-most-likely characters are lined up for selection. And “want” is the most-likely second word. Click!

The result is that the user merely recognizes the Chinese character by overall “looks,” or what we call Gestalt or pattern.

“The students are forgetting how to write the characters stroke-by-stroke because the computer brings it up for them,” my colleague said.

Today, our cell phones are making texting easy for American children by using this same next-most-likely-word input system.

Students are entrained to write without elegance or creativity. They are copying the most common and simplistic way of saying things.

Reading researchers have documented the lack of deep reading among the techie generation. We are now experiencing a similar lack of “deep writing” as teens and tweens send an average of 200 text messages a day, often using a program that narrows their literacy by offering convenience.

Even adults can feel the pull to shallow reading on an electronic screen. I find myself skimming online documents, barely reading



John Richard Schrock

• Education Frontlines

the first line of each paragraph – something I never do with printed pages. This drop in comprehension from scrolling (in comparison with page-by-page text) by students has been solidly documented by Sanchez and Wiley in the journal *Human Factors*. But a decade of documented research means nothing to the computer enthusiasts: Anything digital is always “better.”

And it gets worse. A year ago, one high school teacher pointed out that some of his students could no longer name the months of the year in order. January-February-March no longer came in that order because at any time, a student can reach for the smartphone and read the date. Like a phone number that you look up and repeat to yourself as you dial – but then never move into long-term memory, many students today never look at a calendar. They no longer have the month sequence in mind, although they did know it when they graduated from kindergarten to first grade.

Nor does the techie generation think they need to know anything if they can access it by smartphone. Their memory is more and more stored on their belts or in their purses.

The consequences are far-reaching. For the first time, China entered the international PISA competition and scored a jaw-dropping hundred points beyond prior winners in mathematics. While in China this spring, I asked my Chinese students when were they allowed

to use calculators in math class: “Never before sixth grade.”

What about electronic dictionaries? The limit on English was the same as math. But electronic Chinese dictionaries had to wait until later. To put it simply, Chinese students know what division and logarithms mean; American students just hit a key on the keypad. There is a reason that nearly 90 percent of graduate degrees in U.S. university engineering programs go to foreign students.

Down the road, techie futurists have an even bigger dream.

Forget cursive writing. Why are we even teaching reading? We can put books under a scanner and the computer will read them to us.

And why teach writing? Record into DragonSpeak and it will write for us.

Getting rid of cursive is just the first step.

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

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 and phone number of the author.

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

