

## Other Viewpoints

### Challenged schools need Kansas' help

As lawmakers wrap up this year's legislative session, they should wrap their heads around the challenges facing school districts and many Kansas families. And how little lawmakers have done to help.

As of midday Monday, educators and social workers had identified 2,251 students attending Wichita public schools this year who were either living on the street, in shelters or with other families. That's a record, and 518 more than last year.

To put that number in perspective, if these 2,251 students constituted their own district, it would be larger than 248 of the state's school districts.

These children face many obstacles. They tend to be emotionally unsettled, and many are hungry and lack adequate clothing.

Teachers and school social workers do their best to help, giving the children extra attention and often paying for supplies or eyeglasses.

Students are also pitching in. Some students at Woodman Elementary School formed a "Kindness Club" and sold chewing gum (and the right to chew it in school) to help the homeless children in the district. They raised \$121.75 – not much, but every little bit helps.

What have lawmakers done to help?

The Legislature and Gov. Sam Brownback are planning no increase in base state aid to schools next fiscal year, even though a three-judge panel ruled in January that the funding is unconstitutionally low and ordered it increased by at least \$440 million.

Meanwhile, the Kansas Department for Children and Families has been tightening rules on receiving state and federal assistance, while the Legislature passed a new law to drug test people who receive welfare or unemployment benefits. Lawmakers and Brownback are also balking at allowing an expansion of Medicaid that would enable more than 150,000 Kansans to get needed insurance.

Some lawmakers will say that the tax cuts approved last year were aimed at growing the economy, which could help more Kansans find jobs and afford a house or apartment.

That would be great, if it works. But so far the tax cuts have mostly created budget problems. And those cuts were partly financed by reducing tax credits – so some low-income families are actually paying more in taxes now than before.

If lawmakers go along with Brownback's proposal to make permanent the statewide sales tax increase, low-income families will shoulder more of the tax burden.

Vivian Schurig, a fourth-grader at Woodman, said of her school's fundraising effort: "If something is wrong in our community, it is our job to settle it."

If only more state lawmakers felt the same.

– The Wichita Eagle, via the Associated Press



### Spring? Where? Did she miss it?

I am trying to solve a mystery. Has anyone seen spring? I can only figure that the Saturday I slept late meant that I missed spring.

My kids and friends have been laughing when I send them pictures of my front yard covered in snow. My son said it was hot where he lives in California and I told him we were expecting a blizzard – and by George we did get one.

I always tell him to quit sending us the storms and lousy weather, but I'm thinking that he isn't listening.

I watched with trepidation as the cold wilted my peonies time after time. Snow covered the tender shoots. Good news: the snow protected the shoots from the worst of the freeze and they are happily growing like crazy now.

I don't know much about peonies except they are gorgeous when they bloom and can be tricky to grow. I am hoping the danger of a late freeze is over for this spring, er, summer.

I am growing a dandy crop of weeds now. If this year is like last year, the weeds will be the hardest things in the yard. Dandelions have popped up already and I need to just pull them since they really seem to enjoy being sprayed by Roundup weed killer. Maybe they switched



**Sharon Friedlander**

#### • Musings

the label with fertilizer. All I know is the weeds seem to love it! It probably doesn't help that I call them robo-weeds.

I have been taking the dog out for a good brushing several times a week and the birds are keeping a close eye on that deal. It seems that the birds like his hair for nest lining and they swoop in for a beakful and off they go.

Dogger has been chewing on the new grass. I think he just likes the taste and it is so new that it is still tender. Some folks say that dogs like grass for an upset stomach, but I think my dogger just likes it.

The birds are really active in the mornings just before dawn. I can hear them carrying on when I let dogger out and am amazed by the volume. If you were a light sleeper with the windows open I am betting you would be wide

awake long before you had planned. Most of the sounds are very nice but there are one or two that must be the teenagers based on their volume.

I still can't identify some of the feathered visitors to my yard, but was delighted to see a small flock of cedar waxwings in the trees outside my kitchen window.

I only noticed them when they flexed their tails and the bright splash of yellow was visible. I had only seen waxwings once or twice before in my travels. Their masks and top knots are quite distinctive so it is hard to miss what they are.

Still have no clue what the very small grey birds with yellow are since I haven't found my bird book yet in my unpacking.

I hope everyone is taking the time to enjoy a walk in the park or just sitting on the porch to enjoy the weather before it gets too hot. That may only be later this week so head out and grab a bit of early summer beauty before it is gone.

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

### Invisible lawmakers work after signing

The political fights that begin with the drafting of legislation continue long after bills are enacted into law – sometimes for years

Want to know what's causing a lot of people in Washington to work long hours right now? Here's a hint: it's not immigration reform or gun control or, for that matter, any other legislation coming down the pike. Instead, it's a pair of three-year-old laws.

The Affordable Care Act (known as Obamacare) and the Wall Street reform act known as "Dodd-Frank" both became law in 2010. Most people consider these major pieces of legislation old news, but that's because their civics teachers misled them back in junior high. In the How-A-Bill-Becomes-A-Law version of Congress many of us were taught, the story ends when the bill is signed by the president.

It doesn't. In fact, the president's signature is more like a starter's pistol.

Because after a bill becomes law is when legislative language – which is often deliberately vague and imprecise, in order to wrangle as many votes as possible – gets interpreted and turned into regulatory language. In other words, Congress drafts a rough blueprint; only then does the federal government decide how the machinery will actually work.

And that's where money – lots of money – stands to be won or lost. A few years ago, a group of academics studying tax disclosures related to a single 2004 piece of financial legislation found that firms lobbying for a particular provision made \$220 for every \$1 they spent on lobbying. Which may help explain why, as the Center for Responsive Government recently reported, the health care industry has spent more than \$700 million on lobbying Congress and executive agencies since health care reform passed.

Indeed, the political fight that began with the drafting of legislation continues long after a bill is enacted into law – not for days or weeks or even months, but sometimes for years. Unlike the legislative process, which for all its faults is generally visible and accessible to the

### Other Opinions

#### • Lee Hamilton Center on Congress

public, these battles tend to be invisible and inscrutable.

The first arena in which they take place is within the agency or agencies charged with drafting and enforcing the rules that give teeth to legislation. This process can be lengthy – according to one corporate law firm that has been tracking the rulemaking process for Dodd-Frank, only 38 percent of the rules required by the legislation had been finalized by the beginning of May this year. Special interests trying to have an impact pursue a broad range of tactics, from directly lobbying regulators to getting friendly members of Congress to weaken the agency's appropriation, cut funding for regulatory enforcers, or even block presidential appointments to an agency they dislike. They might also take the opposite tack, lobbying to bulk up a rule and make it so complicated that very few people can understand it, or to add little-noticed – but highly profitable – exemptions.

If that approach doesn't work, there are always the courts, which have final judgment over how to construe congressional language. Lawsuits of these types are intensely fought and can go on for years, sometime blocking or restricting implementation until they're settled.

And then, of course, there's Congress. Opponents of a law are rarely shy about re-legislating it even after it's been enacted. They can try to get it repealed, or to cut its funding, or to enact exemptions, or, as medical device makers, insurers and others are doing right now

with the health-care law, to overturn pieces of it they especially dislike without taking on the entire thing.

Huge amounts of money are at stake in these fights, which can involve an army of sophisticated players: high-powered lobbyists, former regulators and members of Congress, and the federal officials and current members they're focused upon. As tough and sometimes mean-spirited as the reasonably transparent legislative process can get, these shadow battles, far out of the public eye, can be even more so.

Former Secretary of State George Shultz once famously said, "Nothing ever gets settled in this town," and he was right. That is why, as you follow the course of health reform or financial industry reform or any other high-stakes law, it pays to remember that it can take years before it's really possible to gauge the impact of legislation.

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