

# commentary

from our viewpoint...

## Teachers can prevent closed-door job review

Teachers in this part of the state have been less than happy about the results of closed-door sessions, where school boards go over their contracts and decide who will be rehired, who will be fired.

While most contracts are renewed, some are not. The law does not require a school board to give a teacher any reason if they have not achieved tenure, meaning they have taught in the same district and been renewed for three years running. After that, it's almost impossible to fire one.

The closed-door sessions allowed under the Kansas Open Meetings Act for discussion of personnel matters allow administrators and school board members to say whatever they want about a teacher without fear that it will be reported.

Sometimes the result may be the right thing. Sometimes, maybe not. The public has no way to judge, because no comment about a teacher is ever made in public session.

Teachers may benefit because their supposed shortcomings are not aired in public, but then again, the closed sessions allow for comments which may be little more than unsubstantiated gossip. They are closed, in truth, more to protect the board than the employee.

If teachers don't like it, though, they have a solution at hand. Anyone who is to be discussed in a closed session has an absolute right, under the Open Meetings Act, to demand a public hearing. If they do so, the board cannot discuss them in a closed session.

Teachers and other public employees, but especially teachers, would be well advised to file a letter with their employer asking that any discussion of their job be done only in public session.

Then any comment a board member wanted to make about a teacher's performance had better be provable. Comments by a member's neighbor or his cousin's kids wouldn't likely be repeated, because they might not be based on fact. Complaints from parents would have to be documented.

Regular reviews and evaluations by supervisors, probably the principal, would be given as factual, and they might not be flattering to the teacher.

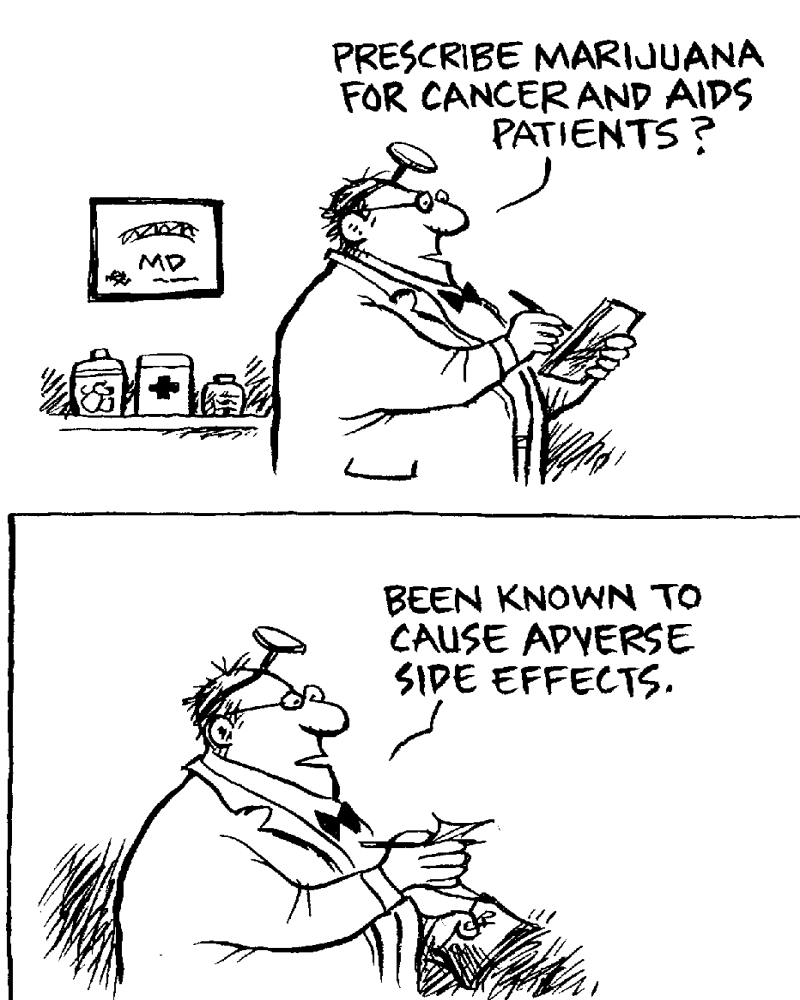
But it's likely that, if administrators and board members had to adhere to a strict standard of provability, as a public meeting would require, then on the whole, fewer teachers would be dismissed. Those who were would know why.

And almost no one would be fired, as some have, on the basis of rumor, innuendo, second-hand complaints and the like. Teachers would have a lot more job security, but the school board could still act when needed. They'd just have to have the facts — and the guts — to back up their claims.

Unfair to the boards? No more so than closed-door session, with their lack of accountability, can be to teachers and other public employees. Or the public.

It takes no act of the Legislature or negotiating team to make this change. It's already the law. Teachers have only to say the word, and their hearings will be open.

And open government is seldom a bad thing. — for anyone. — *Steve Haynes*



## Summer moving creates logistic problems

Everyone's moving but me. What a relief.

Mom's decided to sell the old homestead and move into an apartment.

This bothers my sister more than it does me.

While Marie sees nothing wrong with Mom downsizing and getting rid of the four-bedroom house in Concordia, she is sad because it's always been home to her.

I was 6 when we moved to the big old house on Sixth Street. Before that, we had lived in a duplex and on a farm owned by my grandparents. My mother was pregnant when we moved.

So, while the house on Sixth was where I grew up, it is the only home my sister knew until she married and got a place of her own. Even then, she stayed in Concordia and still lives only four blocks away.

Having lived in four towns and 10 places since I married in 1971, I'm used to moving and the thought of Mom doing so doesn't bother me.

Getting rid of 46 years worth of living is a major logistics problem, though.

Mom's new digs will be a one-bedroom apart-



**cynthia haynes**

• open season

ment with appliances furnished. That means that she needs to get rid of all the furniture in two bedrooms — but oldest daughter has already taken the stuff out of one. Then she has to find a home for most of her living room, dining room and storage room stuff. Clean out the basement. Empty the garage. Give away the plants, tools, extra sheets and towels and bric brac. And sell or donate the thousand or so books stored in her closets. (Mom and I have a lot in common.)

Marie, myself and my three kids are all to be the recipients of these treasures. What we don't want, can't use or refuse to deal with will get given or thrown away.

Mom's hoping to move in July. It's gonna be a

long June.

Then my children are all moving. Oldest daughter Felicia lives in Augusta, Ga., and is moving in June.

Youngest daughter Lindsay lives in Lawrence and is just finishing her education at the university. Now she is looking for a job teaching high school science. Since science teachers are in demand, she shouldn't have any trouble getting a job. However, it won't be in Lawrence and she probably will have to move in August.

Son has been living in a basement apartment for one year in Lawrence and wants to move in with his buddies for next year.

His lease is up at the end of July and he will have to get his sister Lindsay to move him because he plans to be in Colorado all summer working at a restaurant.

What do you bet that Mom and Dad will somehow get rooked into helping both the Lawrence kids move?

I have a feeling that the U-Haul people are going to make a killing off of me this summer.

## His pride is on display

Signs of social progress often appear in the most unlikely places. I found one in the pages of The New York Times Magazine last Sunday.

It was an ad for Mitchell Gold furniture. Dominating the ad was a head-and-shoulders shot of a smiling young man in football pads and eye-black.

"Why does Corey Johnson love Mitchell Gold?" asked the overline. In the text below, Corey is described as a tough football captain whose love for the game is matched by the furniture company's passion for comfort and design.

Most Americans have no idea who Corey Johnson is. He has never won a national championship or a Super Bowl. He hasn't even played college football. So why is he in a national ad?

Because he is gay.

How's the irony of that? The main reasons gay athletes stay in the closet is they fear they will be shunned and lose endorsements. Here is an athlete who landed an endorsement solely because he is gay. The company admired his courage, and it also wanted to crack open the door of America's darkest and deepest closet: male team sports.

There are gay police officers, firefighters, surgeons and cowboys. There are gay soldiers and congressmen. The popular show "Will & Grace" features gay men. Yet, in sports, the word "homosexuality" still cannot be whispered. One might even argue that the stronger gays become in the rest



**joan ryan**

• commentary

of society, the tighter we cling to the myth that there are none in sports. Among the tens of thousands of men who have played professional team sports in America, exactly three have acknowledged they are gay — and then only after they had retired.

Three. ("Gay athletes in professional) football (have gone) even farther back into the closet in the 25 years since I came out," said Dave Kopay, who revealed his homosexuality in 1975, after playing for the San Francisco 49ers and the Washington Redskins.

Now, along comes Corey Johnson.

Against the advice of his parents, who feared for his safety, Johnson came out to his Massachusetts high school teammates during his senior year, in 1999. The team accepted the news with surprise, but also support, and Johnson continued to play and serve as co-captain. The world didn't come to an end.

Indeed, when his story was told on the front page

of the New York Times, and later on television news shows and in Sports Illustrated, Johnson was inundated with admiring e-mails and invitations for speaking engagements.

"My story shows that this can happen, this is possible," said Johnson, who has lived in San Francisco for the past year. He will begin his freshman year at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., this summer. "There are stories of hope out there. There are stories of love and compassion. The teen-agers out there need hope."

Most companies hire athletes to endorse their products because they define the cultural ideal of masculinity, namely strength and courage. Mitchell Gold, the company's gay owner, said he wanted Johnson in his ad for the same reasons.

To Gold, Johnson epitomizes strength and courage — not for playing like a man, but for standing up like one.

The ad won't change the world. Most people who see it won't even know Johnson is gay. Still, it is a sign that change is coming. Maybe it means we're one step closer to having openly gay quarterbacks, point guards and shortstops, and one step closer to changing forever our stereotypes about masculinity and homosexuality.

Joan Ryan is a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle. Send comments to her e-mail at joanryan@sfgate.com.

## Kansas gets weak report card on caring for kids

**Garden City Telegram on caring for children:** Kansas hasn't taken as good care of children over time (as) other states have, based on the results of a survey by Kids Count, compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

From 1990 to 1998, the period for which the study released today includes, Kansas' national ranking dropped in seven of 10 categories and remained unchanged in another. In only two areas over the nine-year period did Kansas show improvement when compared to the rest of the country ...

... More troubling is the state's performance over the nine-year period in addressing other children's issues covered by the Kids Count survey. In the percent of families with children headed by a single parent, Kansas fell from ninth place in 1990 to 22nd in 1998. In the percent of children living with parents who do not have full-time, year-round employment, the state ranking dropped from fourth to ninth.

The state declined from 18th place to 22nd on the percent of teens giving birth, even though the rate improved from 30 births per 1,000 females ages 15-17 to 25 births per 1,000 teen girls.

Kansas did improve on six categories in the numbers of children affected. But despite the improved performance, the state's ranking declined in all but two categories, signaling other states made greater strides in addressing key children's health and social welfare issues ...

Kansas' composite national rank was 12 in 1990. It slipped to 17 in nine years. That the state is mak-

ing strides in the right direction is noteworthy. That other states are surpassing Kansas' efforts deserves attention at state and local levels.

**Topeka Capital-Journal on fighting meth:**

The war on drugs isn't always fought on the streets. Sometimes it's done over the counter. Fact is, the ingredients for producing methamphetamine can be had at the drug store, grocery store or convenience store ...

So, it's awfully difficult for law enforcement officers to nip meth labs in the bud, since ingredients for the highly addictive and destructive drug are legally available over the counter.

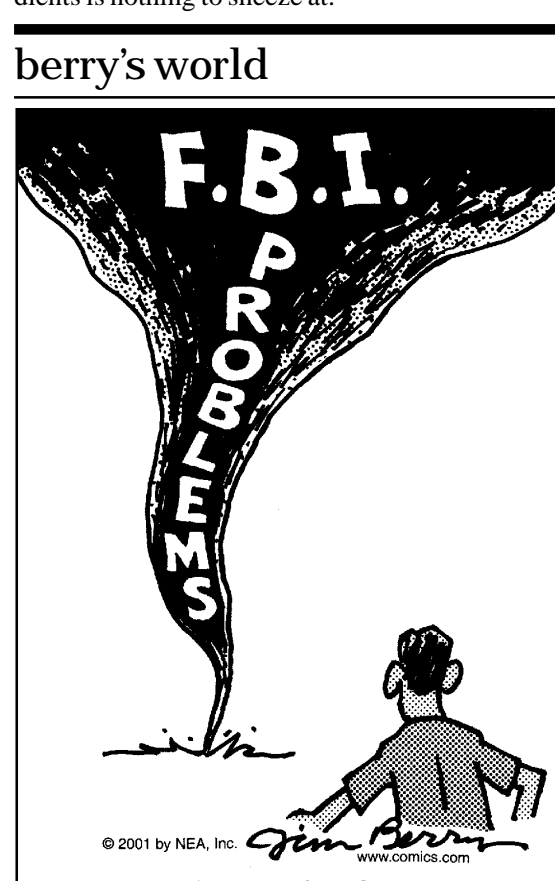
Law enforcement needs help.

As a result, the Kansas Bureau of Investigation and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment have teamed up to launch the "Kansas Retailer Meth Watch Program."

Under the program, retailers agree to take steps to make it more difficult for meth makers to purchase or steal the components for the drug, which KBI director Larry Welch says is at epidemic levels in Kansas. Indeed, the statistics speak volumes: In 1994 there were four meth labs busted; last year, the number was 702. This year it's about two a day.

The retailers are taking various steps to ward off meth makers, including moving the items behind the counter and questioning suspicious buyers. Supplies on the shelf also may be limited — and displays of the coveted products may be placed in areas unfriendly to shoplifters.

It's not going to prevent meth production in Kansas. But making it more difficult to buy the ingredients is nothing to sneeze at.



### Letter Policy

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