

Consolidation of schools rears its ugly head again

Early on, the “C” word rears its ugly head. The legislative session hasn’t even started, and a prominent Republican already wants to start consolidating school districts.

Senate President Steve Morris, a Hugoton Republican, says the Legislature needs to consider forced consolidations to make Kansas schools “more efficient.”

That sounds good, but it’s all wrong. Though Mr. Morris says he’s talking mostly about small districts that surround and bedevil mammoth eastern Kansas megadistricts, the consolidation net would sweep up a lot of rural schools.

Out in western Kansas, at least, consolidation is well under way. Small districts are merging or folding as their student base disappears. We’re fast headed toward the supposed ideal of one district per county.

The real danger, in fact, is that we won’t have enough students some places to maintain even that. The specter of students riding 60 to 90 miles to class each day, then repeating the ordeal in the evening, is not inviting.

Many issues complicate any consolidation of eastern districts. Most of the outlying districts are heavily white, while city districts tend to be more diverse. When city parents sent their kids out to the country schools, is that because classes are better taught, or hallways safer, or because the student body is that much whiter?

It’s foolish to believe that district consolidation would save the state or anyone else money. It never happens. The money just gets

spent. It’s one of the laws of government. Reorganization and consolidation means shuffling the money and the people around, but no actual money ever is saved.

Another thing about consolidation: If the Legislature is serious about the Augenblick and Meyers study, which caused all this trouble and which the Supreme Court relied on to set spending standards, it needs to look at breaking up some of the megadistricts.

That was one of the consultants least-remarked recommendations. The study found that the large city districts — Topeka, Kansas City, Wichita, Shawnee Mission and Blue Valley, for instance — were too big to function well.

So, why not split some of the giants and merge their offspring with some of those pesky rural districts around them? Give the supposedly well run smaller districts more kids, more money — and more color.

Parents should be happy their kids would be in smaller classes in smaller districts.

Educators ought to relish the opportunity to improve education.

Politicians could say they really did something good.

But those big districts are politically powerful and their superintendents aren’t going to jump off the gravy train any time soon.

So, what’s left? If consolidation comes up, the Legislature will pick on the little guys as usual.

Let’s not go there. — Steve Haynes

Building house taxing but fun

I thought the house was a mess before we left for Mexico. You should see it now.

It looks like “The Wreck of the Hesperus” washed ashore in our front room. Mountains of dirty clothes, boxes of Mexican vanilla, plastic tubs of kitchen utensils, sleeping bags, blankets and air mattresses, lost-and-found items we don’t know who they belong to, and, of course, containers of leftover food.

Not real food, but stuff like one or two breakfast bars in a box, one or two individual serving size containers of applesauce, a half-eaten package of dried pineapple chunks, and (I know they didn’t mean to leave this) a just-opened container of cashews. I’m afraid that will be gone before we find the rightful owner.

Jim managed to keep his tools segregated from the melee that erupted in the house. He knew if he let things get commingled, he wouldn’t be able to get back to work for a week.

I remember hearing him say something like, “Let’s get everything put away before the work week starts.”

But he must have said it as I was succumbing to exhaustion. It’s Monday morning, and we’re still weaving our way between the piles, boxes and crates.

—ob— I was so proud of our little team of workers. This was the smallest team we have ever built a house with.

Now, we know why the mission



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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group we operate through suggests no less than 12 people on a team. We had 11, and it taxed every one of us to the max. Physically, it was the hardest I have ever had to work on a house. I’m not ready to concede my age might have something to do with it.

As far as fun goes, though, we had a ball. My, how we laughed. We played Bible trivia games in the van and even managed to stump the preacher’s wife and the evangelist (Jim) a few times.

No major injuries to report. Just

the usual slivers, bruises, aches and pains. With Nurse Charla on board, though, we were prepared for anything short of open-heart surgery. It was like having our own MASH unit.

—ob— Sleep is the one commodity I’m still short on. As I write this, I catch myself nodding off. It’s going to be a long first day back at work.

Maybe if I wear a pair of dark glasses my co-workers won’t notice if I doze off every now z-z-z and z-z-z-z-z-z-z-z.

Write

The Oberlin Herald encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of public interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

Mail letters to 170 S. Penn Ave., Oberlin, Kan., 67749, or by E-mail to oberlin@nwkansan.com.

We do not publish anonymous letters. We sign our opinions and expect readers to do likewise.

We do not publish form letters or letters about topics which do not pertain to our area. Thank-yous from this area should be submitted to the Want Ad desk.

Letters will not be censored, but will be read and edited for form and style, clarity, length and legality. We will not publish attacks on private individuals or businesses which do not pertain to a public issue.



Women reporters earned awards

There should have been a banner saying “Feminists Forever” above the doorway so the guys could cut and run.

But there wasn’t, and all 10 or 11 of them got sucked into the hall at the National Geographic Building in Washington, along with the 100 or so women.

A lawyer and fellow journalist had secured tickets for us to International Women’s Media Foundation “Courage in Journalism” awards.

First there were drinks and hors d’oeuvres in the foyer.

As one man put it, “The groceries are good and the drinks are free.” I had a glass of wine and went to check out the food, since supper had been a salad and I was hungry.

One table was taken up by six or eight kinds of sushi. I don’t care what they do to it, it’s raw seafood and rice, and I don’t do sushi.

A second table had Mideastern dishes — flat bread, a couple of kinds of humus (that’s smashed chickpeas) and some rice dish. I grabbed a piece of bread and some humus. Chickpeas are better than fish, but only a little. Still, you have to have an open mind.

Like Goldilocks, I found the third table more to my liking, with duck egg rolls, chicken puffs and pastries. I had a couple of egg rolls and a puff. The pastries were not on my diet.

Then it was time to watch the ceremonies in the theater. Five women sat on the stage with the president of the Geographic’s women’s media group moderating. It turned out that three of the women were the award winners and two were interpreters.

Next time I complain that the school board, county commission, city council or a letter writer is being mean to me, remind me of this column.

Sumi Khan covers crime, fundamentalism and violence against women in Bangladesh, one of the world’s most dangerous countries for journalists.



She was forced to leave the first paper she worked for because of a story she wrote about a woman raped by a prominent businessman. When he was done, he threw the woman off his balcony.

Last year, three men beat her and slashed her with a knife. The wife and mother of two was in the hospital for several weeks and still does not have full use of one hand. “You have gone too far,” one said.

Today her beat — at her new newspaper — is the Bangladesh Mafia.

Anja Niedringhaus, an Associated Press photographer, started her career as a teenager taking pictures of the fall of the Berlin Wall in her native Germany. She’s been covering wars for 15 years, first in the middle of Europe and more recently in the Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan. Her photos dwell on the toll of war on the innocent, primarily women and children.

This spring, she was the only woman on the 11-member Associated Press team that won the Pulitzer Prize for breaking news photography, mostly from Iraq.

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Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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She says it’s too dangerous now for a blonde European woman to go out taking pictures in Iraq. She spends her days editing pictures from a hotel in the Green Zone.

Shahla Sherkat is the editorial director of Zanan (Women) in Tehran. She founded the monthly magazine in 1991, after she was fired as editorial director at the government-owned weekly magazine Zane Rouz (Today’s Woman).

Since then she has tried to tell the stories of women’s lives in her country, defying the authorities, who are a continual threat to her freedom to report.

One issue of her magazine was seized by the government and destroyed because it contained a photo of

the uncovered face and wrists of a woman.

She spent four hours arguing with a gang of fundamentalist young men bent on destroying all her equipment. She wore them out and they left.

She said through an interpreter that many of her friends tell her they buy the magazine but do not take it home because their husbands and fathers would forbid them to continue getting it.

Boy, that makes an angry call from a public official I’ve offended look pretty tame. Talk about courage.

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Fighting bird flu no easy task

Mike Leavitt has a mission. Taking over a key post in an administration that’s been battered by storms political and temporal, he’d like to block the next blow.

Experts say bird flu is coming, maybe a killer virus like the one that took root at Camp Funston, Kan., in 1918 and killed as many as 40 million worldwide.

As the new secretary of Health and Human Services, one of Mr. Leavitt’s jobs is to fight bird flu. It’s no small thing.

While it’s been nearly a century since the last great outbreak, avian influenza is always there. For the most part, it’s a disease of chickens and other fowl. Once in a great while it mutates to the point where humans can spread it to one another.

As in 1918. If that happens today — and epidemiologists fear it might — the toll worldwide might be far greater than in 1918. Millions of Americans might die.

And someone would blame Mr. Leavitt’s boss, no doubt.

George Bush’s fault, along with the hurricanes and the war. Speaking at the National Press Club in Washington last week, the former governor of Utah did not pretend that the government is ready to prevent a bird flu pandemic. No nation on Earth is prepared, he said. There is a mad scramble to produce antiviral drugs and vaccines, but no one has a stockpile.

“But we’re better prepared today than we were yesterday,” Mr. Leavitt said, “and we’ll be better prepared tomorrow than we are today.”

One task is to revitalize the U.S. vaccine industry, which can’t cope with demand for normal flu vac-

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