

ADVOCATE

Wednesday, February 4, 2015

"No government ought to be without censors and where the press is free, no one ever will."
— Thomas Jefferson

OUR VIEW

West Virginia schools deserve better

Lawmakers in Charleston are not only facing a budget deficit and all of West Virginia's other age-old problems. They're also proposing "solutions" that seem likely to make our troubles even worse.

Take the effort to create charter schools.

For many GOP legislators, this is a long-held dream. Now that the new Republican majority is in place in the Legislature, charter schools could become a reality.

The automatic worry is how this change would affect the state's students and teachers left behind in a public school that would overnight have even fewer resources to work with.

Instead of charging families tuition as private schools do now, charter schools would operate with public money.

If the idea gets the green light, wouldn't West Virginia teachers — already near the bottom in pay compared to their counterparts nationwide — finally give up on a state that chooses to funnel money to these new charter schools rather than toward better compensating the hard-working educators that have long been toiling away in the classroom?

West Virginia Education Association President Dale Lee has pointed out that West Virginia lawmakers only last year authorized the creation of Innovation Zones, where public non-charter schools can get waivers from state education policies and additional money in certain cases. Shouldn't that idea be given a chance to work?

State school board members just conducted a nationwide search for a new state superintendent and landed the energetic, capable

leader they'd sought, but he's barely had time to settle in and begin turning schools around and now the public school system could find itself seriously undermined.

Plus, in pursuing charter schools now, West Virginia would head down a path that hasn't worked so well for other states.

A report issued last year from Gordon Lafer, a political economist at the University of Oregon, focused on the growing low-budget charter sector in Milwaukee, home to the nation's oldest charter system.

To keep costs low, charters such as the Rocketship chain offer a narrow curriculum focused on little more than reading and math test preparation, Lafer found.

The charter schools also are plagued with inexperienced teachers with high turnover and "blended learning" products that enrich the charter school board members' investment portfolios but may not benefit the students, Lafer's study determined.

House Education Committee Chairwoman Amanda Pasdon, R-Monongalia, has called charter schools — along with alternative teacher certification, which would allow a county school system to hire someone who with, say, a master's in math but not an undergraduate teaching degree to teach math — a top priority this session.

But the charter school idea is just one of several not-so-smart education-related bills moving ahead at the Statehouse.

Delegate John Overington, R-Berkeley, wants to bar teachers from

instructing students on what's deemed "politically correct" topics before the schoolchildren have finished basic courses in U.S. history, geography and civics.

What are the "politically correct" topics that Overington believes students shouldn't be exposed to? Overington cites "the study of social problems, global economics, foreign affairs, the United Nations, world government, socialism or communism."

Initially, the bill called for fines and criminal charges for teachers found in violation, but it appears those penalties have been stripped from the legislation.

Thank goodness.

We're all for state schoolchildren understanding American history, but Overington's bill seeks to micromanage what information teachers can present to students instead of viewing teaching professionals as able to make those judgments for themselves. So much for the party of small government.

His stance has made West Virginia the butt of fresh jokes nationwide and it's also upset teachers.

Much worse is the upheaval that West Virginia could see if charter schools becomes law. Already, educators, parents and others are left fretting about what the future might hold for West Virginia's schoolchildren.

We'd like lawmakers eyeing changes to the state's school system to abide by "Primum non nocere," the same oath that physicians take. The Latin phrase means "First, do no harm."

CHRISTINE SNYDER

Repaying a kindness Bruce Jenner showed to me in 1985

I've never found it easy to speak at school career days.

When other speakers can bring in a baby goat to enliven a talk on life as a farmer, or a karate teacher can demonstrate breaking slabs of wood or a baker decorates cupcakes for the kids to sample, a newspaper reporter's work — how to come up with great interview questions and why AP Style still matters — can seem awfully unexciting.

It always seemed smart to share with kids some of my biggest stories, including the celebrities I'd profiled over the years. Just one problem — to the younger generation, so many of my big names are absolute nobodies.

I thought I had a winner in mentioning how I'd interviewed Bruce Jenner during his racing days at Summit Point was a sure winner. I'd grown up seeing the Olympic gold medalist on the Wheaties box, dressed in red, white and blue for our nation's bicentennial, his arms raised in triumph.

But in the late 1980s and early 1990s when I first found myself invited to schools to talk about my job, the year 1976 must have seemed as remote to the youngsters I spoke to as 1776. "Bruce Jenner" equalled blank stares.

But then a funny thing happened. "Keeping Up With the Kardashians" became a thing and suddenly the mention of Bruce Jenner was back on my list of big interviews, except instead of the phrase "Olympic success story" as the descriptor in front of his name, it was "Kim Kardashian's stepdad."

And now, of course, Bruce Jenner is in the news as never before. On Friday night after People magazine offered an online update, "Bruce Jenner Is 'Transitioning into a Woman,' Source



Bruce Jenner won the gold medal in the decathlon at the Summer Olympics in Montreal in 1976.

Confirms," the story soon was all over Facebook.

For many, making jokes about Bruce Jenner's decision is an impulse that

cannot be resisted. I will admit that I found it tough initially to wrap my mind around the idea that this extremely masculine sports hero from my

childhood apparently had been feeling like a woman trapped in a man's form all these years.

But talking about the news with my teenage daughters opened my mind to looking at this in a different way. My focus began to shift to how difficult it must be to make this kind of change — after 65 years as a man, and to make such a change in the public eye.

That thought led me back to that interview with Bruce Jenner. When I met him at the Summit Point Raceway, I'd recently graduated from Musselman High School and was headed to Marshall University on a journalism scholarship. I was spending the summer working at *The Journal* as a sports writer and weekend general assignment reporter.

Most of my work in those months involved decidedly low-profile assignments but then one weekend, I learned I was to interview the Olympic decathlon hero.

This was before the Internet which makes background research so easy. By the time I got the assignment, the library had closed for the day and I found myself armed only with what I already knew about Bruce Jenner — not a whole lot.

There's no question that I felt intimidated about talking to such a well-known person. Several times over that summer when I'd posed questions to officials in Martinsburg, Charles Town and elsewhere, I found my interview subjects quickly grew impatient with my lack of experience and what they perceived as a shaky handle on Panhandle goings on. If bigwigs in my own community dismissed me so easily, what hope of acceptance did I have with a national name?

That afternoon at the track after the race, I waited to approach Bruce Jenner and start the interview, then finally worked up the courage to introduce myself. I then sought to explain what I feared would be a less-than-stellar example of journalism on my part.

"... I'm sure you've been asked all these questions a million times," I began.

"It's no problem," Bruce Jenner assured me. "This is the first time I've ever been asked these questions *by you*." He looked me in the eye; his manner was kind and patient. He smiled and I remember taking a breath and feeling some relief. Maybe this wouldn't be a complete disaster after all.

The next question came from Bruce Jenner: "So, what do you want to talk about?"

As People and other publications share this latest news and the resulting hubbub peppers all our Facebook feeds and I see some friends and acquaintances choosing to make jokes and take jabs, I knew I wanted to share my memories of that day.

I've never forgotten the care and thoughtfulness Bruce Jenner extended to me, a young, small-town, inexperienced reporter.

It's my hope that we can remember that Bruce Jenner is a person, not a punchline. When I talked to him all those years ago, I think the gold medal winner exercised the golden rule — treating me like he'd want to be treated. Why not give the Bruce Jenner of today the same respect, compassion and human kindness any of us would like for ourselves?

— Christine Snyder is the news editor of the Spirit of Jefferson

ANOTHER VIEW

Back to the basics on government

A proposed amendment to an education bill in the West Virginia House of Delegates is not likely to go anywhere, except away. It ought to be shelved — but the frustration behind it should not be ignored.

Too many high school graduates, not just in the Mountain State but throughout the country, are ignorant of basic history, knowledge of our system of government, and economics. That is a recipe for the method of government that made our nation the envy of the world to come crashing down around our ears.

Yet despite the fact that failing in many public schools has been apparent for some time, little has been done to address it. That may have something to do with the recognition among some politicians that the public's ignorance is a good thing for them.

So arrogant have some in powerful roles become that they actually brag about their ability to pull the wool over many Americans' eyes. Remember what Jonathan Gruber, one of the architects of Obamacare, said about "the stupidity of the American voter" making it possible to enact the program?

Several members of the House of Delegates want to do something drastic about the problem. They have proposed an amendment that would make it a crime for teachers to proceed to course

material "involving the study of social problems, global economics, foreign affairs, the United Nations, world government, socialism or communism" before covering basics of U.S. history, geography and government in this country at all levels.

Obviously, there could be some discussion about the lawmakers' priorities. For example, really learning about global economics is an excellent idea.

But the message is clear: Public schools need to do a better job of teaching students what they need to know to make intelligent decisions regarding government.

Curriculum and learning outcome requirements have become so detailed that few educators have time to cover much optional material. That, not how individual teachers guide their classrooms, is likely to be a big part of the problem.

The amendment probably will be passed over and forgotten — as, again, it should be. If a teacher's work is unacceptable, the solution is not to haul him or her out of the classroom in handcuffs.

But the fact some legislators see the problem of an ill-informed public as that serious should not be passed over.

— From the Feb. 2 *The Intelligencer/Wheeling News-Register*



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

W.Va. needs energy efficiency too

It is simple and clear that energy efficiency is more important than we might think to keeping our energy bills affordable. Energy efficiency means so much — from sealing your doors and windows to swapping out traditional incandescent light bulbs for more a more efficient and cut. We can live more comfortably and cut our energy bills by utility energy efficiency programs and make individual everyday choices to

save energy. Through Energy Efficiency jobs are created, our hard-earned money is saved and less stress is placed on the power companies to provide electricity.

So, why the lack of energy efficiency programs in West Virginia when surrounding states advocate for energy efficiency? Potomac Edison offers their customers many more programs in Maryland than here in West Virginia to help customers take control of their energy use. Every day I hope that our elected officials will make the desperately needed change towards a more energy efficient state and every day I lose a little bit of morale as I

see little or no change.

I want to see Gov. Tomblin make it a real priority to strengthen energy efficiency programs in West Virginia. He can start to do that by appointing a real advocate for everyday West Virginians to the Public Service Commission. I would be, personally, uplifted to see our governor advocate for the people of West Virginia.

Why not use energy efficiency to keep our heads up and our money in our pockets?

McKenzie Allen
Kearneysville