

Tell it to the Chieftain

SCHOOL DISTRICT PERFORMANCE

Simple steps can determine student outcomes

I feel compelled to write in rebuttal to your recent editorial regarding the scholastic status of the District 60 and District 70 school systems.

You were very quick to react to the report issued a week ago, in which all the D60 and D70 schools scored at the lower end of the scale, by immediately lambasting the school districts for having inferior teachers and poor management.

In the case of Liberty Point International School in Pueblo West (the only school with which I am intimately familiar and therefore the only one about which I feel qualified to speak), you could not be more wrong.

Numerous scientific research studies over recent years have proven that the predominant root cause of poor scholarship, failure and dropout rates in our schools is poverty. I can hear you grumbling to yourself that “being poor doesn’t keep you from learning.” I, and countless researchers vastly more qualified than I, would beg to differ.

Poverty in this country is at an all-time high, and the stratification between the “haves” (of which I assume you are a member, since you are obviously employed at *The Pueblo Chieftain*) and the “have-nots” is growing.

With the current unemployment rates, it should be no shock to anyone that there are large numbers of people

in this county who are unemployed or underemployed, and therefore existing at an overwhelming level of stress trying to care for their families.

Poverty, and the attendant stress in the home, breeds anger, hopelessness and apathy, which can sometimes then lead to other problems such as drugs and alcohol. In addition, most families without an employed head of household also are without any health insurance benefits, so illnesses go untreated, which leads to excessive school absences for the children and disability for the adults. Many children are underfed, or poorly fed at best, and many are lacking the most basic amenities, such as clean clothes and personal hygiene assistance.

I am a volunteer mentor at Liberty Point International School two days a week, and have witnessed the above problems firsthand. With approximately 500 students, more than 100 of those students are failing at least one subject. This directly correlates to the fact that approximately 65 percent of the total student body qualifies for free lunch under the federal guidelines for low-income or poverty level households.

The teachers and staff at Liberty Point are some of the most dedicated and conscientious I have ever encountered. (I have raised three children who attended different schools from

preschool through college, have been a full-time classroom volunteer, and a school board president.) In addition to delivering the subject matter, these teachers are constantly encouraging the children and giving them positive feedback. They offer free tutoring after school and on weekends. There also are 10 adult volunteers (provided through the United Way) mentoring some of the children most in need of help.

So let me ask you a few very basic questions:

Do your children go to bed each night with a full stomach, and do they sleep in a clean, warm bed, and wake to a healthy breakfast? Or do they have a small piece of cold pizza for supper and a snack bag of potato chips for breakfast because that’s all they could find in the house?

Do they have clean clothes to wear or do they go to school in the same dirty hand-me-downs they’ve worn for the last three days, only to be teased and ridiculed by their fellow students?

In the evening, do you check to make sure they’ve done their homework and help them with it if necessary? Or do you not even know if they’re home?

Do you talk to them about the importance of getting an education so they can be productive members of society? Or do you just sit around the house and

complain about how “the system” has mistreated you and how hopeless your life is?

Do you attend parent-teacher conferences? Or are you too busy or just not interested?

Do you praise them and encourage them when they achieve a good grade? Or just call them “stupid” and “worthless” when they fail?

Do your children know each day that they are loved, that they are safe and secure, and that the future is bright for them? Or do they wake every morning uneasy and afraid, wondering what bad thing will happen next?

If you were able to answer yes to the first half of all those questions, I congratulate you and wish you well. Your children are obviously in the lucky 35 percent who don’t qualify for a free lunch and are not failing academically.

But all those other children, the ones whose parents would have to answer yes to the second half of those questions — please try to understand that they are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to excelling in the classroom. The teachers and staff are working as hard as they can to brighten those kids’ lives, so save your slings and arrows and instead give them a pat on the back.

*Emily Price
Pueblo West*

EILERS NEIGHBORHOOD

Local leadership, science lacking

Having attended three separate meetings about the Environmental Protection Agency’s desire to clean up contaminated soil, I was saddened by the lack of leadership based upon science and not emotion or downright confusion by elected leaders and citizens.

Try this: What is the RBE? It stands for relative biological effect. Two people can be exposed to the same levels of a suspected offending substance and one may get ill and the other not.

Asbestos is an example. This is poorly understood in the scientific community. If one of the two is a cigarette smoker then that person’s risk increases 40 times over the other one who does not smoke.

Heavy metals act in the same manner. Lead, chromium and mercury can cause enzymopathies. This can and does occur at very low levels of exposure. Lactase non-persistence is one example for sugar metabolism; there also is an effect upon protein and fats ingested. There are additional situational responses to environmental stimuli in this cluster of heavy metals that can make matters worse, such as age. Younger people are more sensitive and also human sperm and eggs.

In the attics of these homes with contaminated soils, testing should proceed to test levels in the accumulated dust in those places; very important as such results of testing may require demolition of structure such as what happened in Love Canal housing superfund cleanup.

Most of all at these meetings, our health department director and our seven council people and the three commissioners all stumbled about as if they were stricken with a disease called confusion and uncertainty on how to act.

The residents, who are in the middle of the mess, have looked for leadership and seen no proactive activity by the leaders mentioned.

Additionally, all residents should be writing letters to the governor and to the contact person at the EPA documenting their concerns and fears.

Why let confused and demoralized leaders write letters to the governor? To what end?

Our health department seems to have taken a back seat as well and shows poor leadership in this area.

Residents also should ask the EPA about what else there is that the public is being not told. What of all the same slag dumps being used for railroad ballast? Or was used around town for driveway surfacing? Look also at the south end of the steel mill and see massive piles of slag. Is there a problem there?

Seems to me, just an observer, that the lack of leadership will keep the leaders and the citizens in the back seat as this situation unfolds.

Science is good for us and we use it all the time, except in this situation with poor leaders.

*Larry Fancher
Pueblo*

COLORADO LEGISLATURE

Gun law ideas lacking

The Sunday edition of *The Pueblo Chieftain* listed laws our four representatives from the Pueblo area are sponsoring in the 2014 state Legislature. Missing from their agendas are proposals to fix the economy and unemployment problems.

I was under the impression that last year’s recall election was supposed to let politicians know the voters will recall them if they don’t represent us.

Sens. Larry Crowder and George Rivera want to repeal the new background gun check law since they believe that gun stores aren’t conducting background checks on individual sales because there’s no money in it for them.

I agree with the second part of that but they are wrong to suggest that all gun stores have ignored the law. The previous day’s Chieftain reported that the Colorado Department of Public Safety reported in early December that 4,702 private sale background checks had been conducted since Jan. 1, which included 72 denials because the buyer had a criminal record.

I would suggest the law be amended to allow the gun stores to keep \$5 of the \$10 fee

since they are the ones who are doing the work. This would encourage more gun stores to provide this service.

I would like to see Rep. Leroy Garcia sponsor such an amendment since so far his record on gun legislation has been mostly absent. If he has trouble with the new gun laws, he should take the lead in fixing them.

Rep. Clarice Navarro is another one wanting to repeal the gun laws, yet she has failed to propose an alternative.

For Sen. George Rivera, he has stated he has no time to work on bills that impact Pueblo as he is already sponsoring five bills in the Senate. This info came out of his meeting with Pueblo County commissioners regarding legislation they would like to see. One of these proposals is asking the state to pay for the recall election that got him elected and he claims he supports this.

Talk is cheap, Senator Rivera. I believe he said he is in favor of this with no intention of actually doing anything about it.

*Jim Towns
Pueblo*

RECREATIONAL MARIJUANA

Secondhand smoke applies to pot

So the Pueblo City Council is struggling with yet another conundrum of the legalization of marijuana — whether folks can smoke outside or not.

I wish to point out that we struggled long and hard to get tobacco smoke out of contained indoor areas because of the risks of secondhand smoke. Marijuana smoke also presents the risk of secondhand smoke. Does forcing people to smoke inside their home put those choosing to not smoke, especially children, at increased risk?

Marijuana smoke contains several of the same carcinogens and co-carcinogens as tobacco smoke, Benzo(a)pyrene, a procarcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon, is present in marijuana tar at higher concentrations than in tobacco tar.

Recent studies out of New Zealand demonstrate that the risk for lung cancer actually is greater in adults 55 years of age or younger for those smoking one joint per day for years than smoking one pack of tobacco per day.

Since the cat already is out of the bag, so to speak, and we are on the verge of another huge public health crisis, similar to what we have experienced with tobacco, I suggest that we address this proactively with a great deal of education about the downsides of chronic marijuana use so that people can make informed choices.

From past research, we know that one in 10 users possibly will develop an addiction to marijuana. This was based on THC concentrations up to 9 percent. We have no idea whether the current, much higher concentrations will increase these risks. Only time will tell.

I suggest that City Council members actually encourage folks to smoke outside. This could be limited to back porches and fenced backyards that are private and not open to public viewing.

*Dr. Libby Stuyt
Addiction psychiatrist
Pueblo*

WORD CHOICES

Mental illness is a disease

Although I appreciated your article about the new program offered at Fort Lyon for people with mental illness and or substance use disorder, I would like to recommend in the future using more sensitive and nonstigmatizing wording to relay your message.

People are not their illness; they are people first. For instance, your article stated: “The program now serves homeless clients who are mentally ill, alcoholics, drug addicts.” This is very stigmatizing wording and prevents people from seeking help. Referring to someone as a drug addict, alcoholic and or mentally ill is hurtful. These are diseases. We would not refer to someone who has cancer as “clients who are cancerous.”

A more appropriate way of conveying your

message about people who have these health issues would have been: “The program serves people who have mental health and or substance use disorders.”

I am assuming you use Associated Press guidelines, but it seems you missed the specific guidelines that were published in 2013 on how to incorporate nonstigmatizing wording about these two diseases. I would be happy to send those to you if you are unable to locate them.

Please try to be more sensitive in your writing when it comes to people with mental illness and substance use disorders.

*Patrice Marqui
Loveland*

RECALL COSTS

Paying for the election

So the county and George Rivera are looking for ways to pay for the recall. You mean the recall that is unconstitutional and should never have been allowed in the first place? This open recall will be challenged in federal court in Denver. If I have my preference, it will be declared unconstitutional and Angela Giron and John Morse will be reinstated.

I think the good people of Pueblo County got caught off guard in the recall, thinking there possibly could not be enough stupid people to vote

for the recall.

Well, here is your remedy Pueblo County Clerk Ortiz and Republican Secretary of State and so-called Senator Rivera.

You have over 10,000 signatures on that recall petition and the only way to pay for it is to bill each one of them \$20. My math tells me that this would bring in over \$200,000, enough to pay for it. Under no circumstances should the taxpayers of Colorado be paying for this stupidity.

*Monte Miller
Pueblo*

CITY OF PUEBLO

City should promote recycling

It is inconceivable to me that the leaders of this city make no effort to recycle waste. Now, we can’t even recycle newspapers.

Is there some ulterior motive to fill our precious lands with tons of garbage? Or is it some

other concealed payoff? Or is it simply ignore and turn-the-other-cheek behavior? Is it any wonder we have a Pew Town label?

*Vickie LaVan
Pueblo*

NEW YEARS RESOLUTIONS

Silver Sneakers program pays off

I would like to start the new year by expressing my appreciation to two wonderful people for the vast improvement in my last year.

I’d like to give a hearty pat on the back to two trainers from the YMCA whose talent, humor and enthusiasm as trainers in the Silver Sneakers

program has helped me lose weight and greatly decreased my pain and stiffness from arthritis. To Janique and Cheri, my enormous gratitude. A huge thank you for greatly changing my life in 2013.

*Diane Ritchey
Pueblo*