

# The Pueblo Chieftain

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**EDITORIALS**

## EPA & Chicken Little

**T**HE SKY may not be falling after all. Pueblo City Council was reluctant to add the Eilers neighborhood to the federal Superfund list two years ago. Many city officials wanted more concrete data before seeking the public health designation from the Environmental Protection Agency. Generations of Puebloans had called Eilers home without a hint of health concerns. Why, all of a sudden, was the former smelter site — which operated from 1883 to 1908 — a serious cause for concern?

But pressure from Pueblo County commissioners and the Pueblo City-County Health Department, along with preliminary testing by the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, forced the city to reluctantly relent. After the Superfund designation was secured on Dec. 11, additional testing and publicized results have slowed to a crawl. ATSDR's exposure investigation report was finally released Sept. 10 and the health impacts near the former smelter site appear to be far less than people may have been led to believe.

It appears to us that the earlier hoopla stirred up by EPA, county officials and public health personnel was caused by bad science and a rush to action. According to the report, just four children out of the 135 adults and kids tested had lead levels in their blood above the federal standard of 5 micrograms per deciliter. Three other children had blood levels below but approaching the 5 micrograms standard. There were no elevated arsenic levels among any of those tested.

The report indicates that all of the children with higher lead levels displayed "pica" behaviors — eating soil, sand, paint chips, etc. And all the homes where the children live "had lead-based paint that was chipping and peeling."

We are glad the kids with high lead levels have been identified so that they can receive medical care and their families can be educated about avoiding sources of lead in the future. High lead levels in kids can cause neurological, cognitive and attention-related behavioral effects.

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But there remains no scientific proof that the former smelter site is causing widespread havoc in the Eilers neighborhood and beyond. Yet folks in Eilers are being held hostage, perhaps for decades into the future, because of a Superfund designation that is based less on fact than on bureaucratic bullying and public hysteria.

We join Council President Steve Nawrocki in his frustration over the situation.

"It would have been nice to have all the medical testing done and results known before we had to make a decision on requesting Superfund listing," he said at Monday's council meeting. "... We probably could have dealt with those cases without having to tie up the entire area for years as a Superfund site."

Many questions remain: Why did Eilers have to be designated a Superfund site before definitive test results were available? Why wasn't significant baseline testing done to determine if the lead levels in kids within Eilers was higher than the general population of Pueblo? Why weren't all possible lead contamination sources given equal weight in the preliminary examination of the public health issue?

The entire situation harkens back to the old folk tale of Chicken Little, who believed the world was coming to an end after an acorn fell on her head.

Chicken Little was so convinced that disaster was imminent, she proclaimed "The sky is falling." Her fear-mongering helped convince all those around her that catastrophe was right around the corner.

In the case of Eilers, disaster was declared months ago before solid facts could be known. Public response to public health concerns should always take the opposite approach — facts before action.

Perhaps after years of EPA action (and inaction), and millions of taxpayer monies being spent, the truth will be known. At this point, we think the whole thing could end up being a folk tale of Chicken Little proportions.

## Student readiness lacking

**P**UEBLO CITY Schools (D60) and Pueblo County District 70 have both experienced a drop in average ACT exam scores, according to data released by the Colorado Department of Education last week.

Based on the scores, the juniors (now seniors) in both districts are well behind their peers throughout the state of Colorado. The dismal showing proves that most Pueblo area students are not ready to pursue a college education and perhaps not ready for today's job market.

The numbers speak for themselves. The average ACT score at D60 was 17.9 on a 36-point scale. That was down from an 18.1 average last year. District 70 students averaged 19.4 on the test, down from an average of 19.5 last year. The Colorado state average was 20.1, a drop from 20.3 last year.

Taking the ACT exam — which attempts to measure a student's proficiency in English, math, reading and science — is a requirement of all juniors in Colorado.

Colorado is one of 16 states that require all juniors to take the ACT. In states that don't have that requirement, only young people considering going on to college take the test. Those states typically have a higher scoring average.

In 2001, Colorado and Wyoming were the first two states to require that everyone par-

ticipate in the college entrance exam, ensuring that average scores would be lower. State officials decided the ACT would replace the 11th-grade standardized testing requirement and they assumed it would help convince some students to pursue a college education who wouldn't otherwise do so.

We doubt it's had that kind of effect. The Pueblo ACT scores certainly remain disappointing. Any time our students score considerably less than others in the rest of the state, we should take notice and pledge to do something about it.

But maybe it's also time to reconsider the state requirement that all students take the ACT. Not every student wishes to, nor has the aptitude for, higher education. But by rating a student's proficiency based on a college-level scale, the state is setting up many young people for a discouraging result.

A Colorado-specific standardized test, which would include measurements for students' grasp of subjects that would serve them well in a work setting, may be a better approach.

Whether we stick with the ACT or go in a different direction, Pueblo area school officials now have another reminder that we have more work to do to raise the academic performance of our younger generation. Better prepared students are important to our community's and our state's economic future.

**REHABILITATION EFFORTS**

## A mission to reform



**GEORGE WILL**

**Opinion**

**CLEVELAND** — About a mile from where the Cleveland Indians test their fans' patience, there is a facility that expresses Ohio's attempt to temper justice with patience. The facility resembles a school, except for the razor wire.

This prison contains 619 women, one of whom, Jessica Torok, mother of three sons — in the third year of her four-year sentence for manufacturing methamphetamines — says: "I've changed things I didn't even know needed changed," so "now I can go home and be the mother I should have been."

Until she goes home, she will "live the Army values." Here, she says proudly, "we live military style."

Women who volunteer for the military unit live in a dorm whose halls are decorated with the U.S. armed services' emblems. They practice precision marching, make their beds and organize their clothes drawers with military precision.

They also loudly recite a long oath that is the verbal equivalent of drums and bugles, culminating in a vow to "engage and destroy" enemies of the nation that have put them behind razor wire. Having long since taken responsibility for their lives, they express not a scintilla of today's culture of grievance and victimhood.

This military unit is one approach to bringing order to what were disorderly lives. Few people are in prison because their parents did not hire good SAT prep tutors. Most come from fractured families that, when concentrated in neighborhoods, produce turbulent social cauldrons rich with possibilities for danger-

ous choices.

The vast majority of today's 2.2 million prisoners will return to the places where they made the choices that got them incarcerated. This is a recipe for recidivism — unless their passage through what is too cheerfully called the "correctional system" gives them new inner resources for living safely.

Here, in one of Ohio's 11 prisons devoted to preparing prisoners for "reintegration," Gary Mohr is particularly proud of the separate faith-based unit. Before being offered the job of director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, Mohr, now 62, was invited to a 15-minute meeting with Gov. John Kasich. The meeting lasted, as 15-minute Kasich meetings sometimes do, three hours. The two men were well-met because Mohr embodies Kasich's style. Call it evangelical governance.

The faith-based unit might more accurately be called faith-drenched, and not just because Christians so inclined can experience full-immersion baptism. Participation in the faith-based unit is voluntary. And Ohio is disinterested regarding the validity of particular faiths but intensely interested in the utility of faith in reforming the faithful.

Amanda Freed robbed a pharmacy, and she will not be free until 2021, when she can take to the job market the fluency she now brings to a PowerPoint lecture on the facility's many facets. Jenny O'Grady, who found a job two weeks after ending her six years in prison, says: "My past doesn't define who I am today."

Mohr, who considers prisons "the most unreformed part of government," says his mission is "life reformation," which requires a lot of money as well as patience. One test of a society is how well it treats those it does not need to treat well. Here and in similar prisons, Ohio is passing the test.

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**IMMIGRATION REFORM**

## Wanted: Serious leadership



**RUBEN NAVARRETTE**

**Opinion**

**SAN DIEGO** — I'm often asked which of the two major political parties is better on immigration. It's a trick question. They're both dreadful.

Lawmakers have mastered the game of doing nothing except misleading their constituents.

Democrats campaign by portraying themselves as immigrants' best friend; once in office, they build walls, militarize the border and deport people in record numbers.

Republicans campaign by opposing "amnesty" and praising law and order; once in office, they create enforcement loopholes in order to stabilize the workforce, quietly push for legal status for the undocumented, and refuse to crack down on employers.

At the moment, it's hard to decide what is more disconnected from reality: Donald Trump's hardhearted and wrongheaded immigration policy; or the phony outrage by Democrats, liberals, Latinos and reformers who are shocked that Trump is threatening to deport millions and divide families. For nearly seven years, these groups had little to say when President Barack Obama did exactly that.

Predictably, many of those Democrats who made excuses for Obama are now supporting Hillary Rodham Clinton for president.

This would be the same Clinton who recently sat down with renowned Hispanic "journalist" Mario Lopez to declare she was deeply troubled by Trump's harsh tone toward immigrants. See, Democrats only pick up

the immigration issue when they can use it as a club to pummel Republicans.

At least by fielding questions from Lopez — host of the entertainment news program "Extra" — Clinton didn't have to worry that she might be asked about why, while serving in the Senate in 2003, she felt the need to declare on a New York radio show that she was "adamantly against illegal immigrants."

Nor did she have to worry that she might be asked about her Senate vote for the Secure Fence Act of 2006. The bill called for the construction of an additional 700 miles of fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border. At the time, she said in Trumpeque language, "a country that cannot control its borders is failing at one of its fundamental obligations."

Elsewhere on the campaign trail, Trump may be small-minded but he thinks big when it comes to getting rid of illegal immigrants.

The GOP front-runner recently assured supporters on a call that, with his management skills, he could move 11 million illegal immigrants out of the country within two years.

What a slacker. If you talk to illegal immigrants, they will offer you a counter-assurance that, if they get deported, with their survival skills, they'll be back on this side of the border within two weeks.

A New York-based cable news anchor recently asked me why illegal immigrants couldn't be "permanently deported." The answer: human nature. Whether we call them immigrants or refugees, those who will risk their lives for a shot at something better are serious people engaged in a serious endeavor.

It's too bad that we can't say the same about our elected officials and presidential candidates.

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